

DRAGONLANDS

VOLUME 1 - 3
DRAGONLANDS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEGG JENSEN

HIDDEN

HUNTED

RETRIBUTION

1

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Dragonlands, Books 1 - 3

Hidden, Hunted, and Retribution

Megg Jensen



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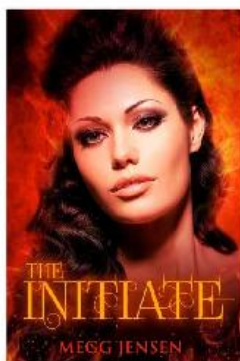
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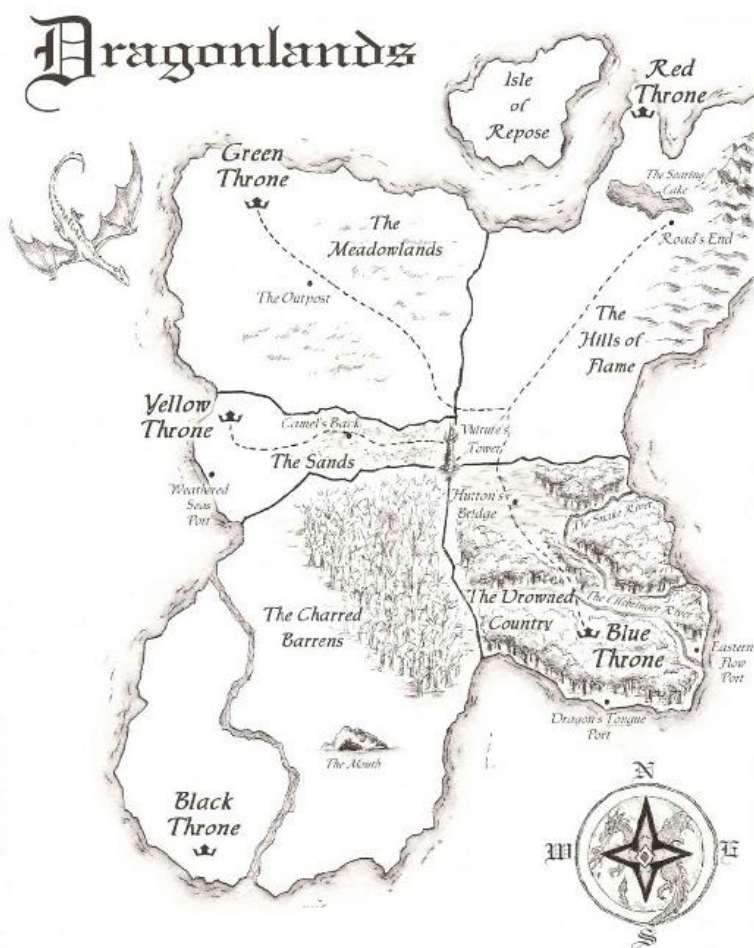
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HIDDEN

by
Megg Jensen

*For Luke, sorry I accidentally smacked you in the face with my braid. It
certainly inspired quite a story!*

Map of the Dragonlands



Prologue

Sophia woke to the sharp piercing cry of an infant. She pulled the rough blanket over her ears, hiding from the noise. Its screams cut through the otherwise silent air.

“Is someone going to take care of that baby?” Sophia asked from under the covers. She peeked out. Her parents weren’t in their bed. It didn’t even look like it had been slept in.

Sophia inched the covers down and sat up. “Momma?” She hadn’t used that word since she was a little girl. At thirteen, she was nearly a grownup. The only answer came from the crying baby.

She tossed off her covers, slipped into her shoes, and laid a housecoat over her shoulders. She pulled the door open, stepping out into the damp morning chill. A heavy cloud of fog hung in the air, thinner in spots than others, but Sophia couldn’t see to the edge of the village to her left. She hadn’t ever seen a fog that dense.

The people of Hutton’s Bridge were strangely quiet. By this time of morning, adults were always up and about their jobs. Some preparing for a long day of blacksmithing or hawking their wares to the travellers who came from far and wide to buy their honey. Hutton’s Bridge had the reputation for the sweetest honey, and it was rumored their honey had healed many an affliction. Even the royal family in The Sands claimed it saved the king during a particularly bad bout of stomach distress.

Yet this morning, no one was about. Sophia’s slow gait picked up. Something prodded inside, whispering that none of this was right. She pinched her arm, to reassure herself she wasn’t trapped within a dream.

The crying grew louder. It had to be the Connell baby, born just a month ago. Her mother was always so attentive, but today it seemed all of the adults were busy with something else. Maybe they were in the meeting hall?

Sophia knocked on the door to the Connell cottage, sure now that the crying definitely was their baby girl, Kimma. The door swung open silently and Sophia crept into the dark cottage. She glanced to the bed the Connells shared, but just like her cottage, the sheets were

unwrinkled. Not slept in.

The baby squirmed in its blanket; the swaddling had come loose. Sophia hurried over to the infant, lying on the floor. Who left their babies on the floor? Her hands cupped under the baby's armpits, the tips of her fingertips holding the bobbling head steady.

"Shh," she cooed in Kimma's tiny ear. "It's okay." Sophia rocked back and forth on her heels, hoping to calm the baby and herself. With each passing moment, fear and panic rose inside her like bile after eating a bad mushroom.

Sophia crept out of the cottage, holding Kimma tightly to her chest. "Where is everyone?"

Kimma cooed in response, her crying over now that she was being held.

Slowly, doors to cottages opened all down the street. A head here, a pair of eyes there. Small hands grasping the wooden frames. Tiny slippered feet shuffling out of doorways.

Not one adult in sight.

Another door opened wide. Sophia smiled in spite of the situation. It was Tomas, the boy she'd recently developed a crush on. "Where are your parents?" he asked Sophia pointedly.

"I don't know. I heard Kimma crying and went to find her. Her parents aren't here either. It looks like none of the beds have been slept in." She stroked Kimma's little tuft of black hair.

"It's the same in my cottage. Where are they?" Tomas turned around, yelling over his shoulder, "Michael, Scott, come out here and run through the village. See if you can figure out where they are." He turned back to Sophia. "Take Kimma back to your cottage and wait, just in case there's something sinister going on here. I don't want you getting hurt."

Sophia nodded, fear streaking through her blood like ice on a cold winter's night. She tried not to bounce too much, she'd heard a baby could die if shaken too hard, as she ran back to her cottage. Closing the door behind her, she finally took a deep breath.

"It's going to be okay," she said to Kimma, even though she knew she was really talking to herself.

Sophia waited.

Outside her cottage, children cried, calling for their mothers. Some begging for their fathers. Their calls went unanswered.

Finally a knock came on her door. "Sophia?"

"Come in, Tomas."

The door swung open and closed behind him just as fast. His chest rose and fell, his breathing erratic.

"What is it? Did you find them?"

Tomas shook his head.

It was then she noticed what was in his trembling hands. Flesh. Blood.

A hand.

She held the baby tighter and backed away from Tomas. “What is that?”

“Joseph’s hand. He ran into the fog and a moment later, this flew back through.” Tears streamed down Tomas’ cheeks, over his blubbery lips, and onto his nightshirt.

Sophia had never seen him cry. He had always been the bravest boy she knew.

“And the adults?” she asked.

He shook his head. “They’re all gone. We’re alone.”

Chapter 1

Death lurked in the air that afternoon. Tressa sat by Granna's bedside, clasping hands with the woman who, at ninety-three, had outlived her entire generation.

"You are leaving tomorrow, yes?" Granna's liver-spotted hands shook. The rough-hewn walls seemed to close in. Tressa knew Granna didn't have much time left. She wanted to squeeze out every moment she could with her. Nineteen years wasn't enough time.

The smell of tonic and medicine hung in the dark room. When the curtains were drawn, Granna's eyes watered. Adam, the village healer, said sunlight would help Granna recover, but Tressa knew the truth. Granna would leave her soon, leave the village, taking the only first-hand knowledge of the outside world with her. It was a place no one in Hutton's Bridge had seen since Granna was just a child, not since the impenetrable fog had descended at the borders of their village. They weren't even sure anymore if it was real or part of Granna's imagination.

"Yes, Granna. You chose me, remember?" Tressa stroked Granna's hair with her free hand. The silver strands were still long, and luxurious like a newly spun piece of cloth. "Me, Geoff, and Connor."

Granna nodded. "Yes, yes, I remember now." A gasp preceded each breath, struggling against the inevitable finality of life. "I am the only one you will leave behind. It is easier that way."

Tressa's eyes dropped to the floor strewn with straw, the hem of her long, cotton dress sweeping it every time she moved. After three years of coupling, she had not one baby to show for it. Not even a failed pregnancy. Tressa had felt the cold whiff of death breathing down her neck every time she didn't conceive, knowing she was likely to be chosen over any woman who had children.

"Tressa, it is your destiny to leave the village."

She held back a sigh. Granna was about to die. Why would she want her only great grandchild, the only family she had left, to follow her in death? No one who ever entered the fog returned to the village. It was as much of a death sentence as Granna's failing health.

Tressa's palms began sweating. A tremble skipped up her arms to

her chest where her heart pounded out an irregular, nervous beat.

Granna took another deep breath. Without looking at Tressa, she said, "The fog. You must leave."

Tressa managed to force out a small laugh. Granna's grave expression didn't fool. "Granna, don't you want me to live a long life, like you have?"

Granna shook her head. "Beyond the fog there is a life for you. I have seen it."

No one had the gift of sight in her village. Granna claimed once there was magic before the fog descended. It was one element of her stories that made the outside world seem so desirable. Tressa would give anything for a magical potion to save her great grandmother. Instead, they could only rely on Adam's knowledge of healing.

"But I was supposed to live to watch you leave. I saw it. I believed it would happen." She took another breath, shallower this time. "I don't know if I can hold on until tomorrow." Granna's eyes flashed with anger. She held out one frail hand. An owl flew through the window, landing on Granna's fingers.

"That's my Nerak."

The little owl hooted in response.

"You take care of Tressa, Nerak. Help her to see the truth."

The owl's head bobbed, then it flew out the window and sat in the tree. The fog's undulating fingers caressed the owl's ruffled wings. Granna's cottage stood on the town's border, next to the curtain of fog.

Granna always said the downy owl had magic. Tressa had never seen it do anything different from the other trained birds in the village. Tressa leaned down, kissing Granna on the forehead. Granna was cold, too cold. Her skin paled into a gray pallor. Her blue eyes lost focus, gazing somewhere over Tressa's shoulder.

"I love you, Granna," Tressa said.

"I love you too, my sweet Tressa." Her voice rattled. Granna's eyelids fluttered, then closed with a finality only accompanied by death. One last breath expelled.

Tressa laid Granna's hand on her stomach. Taking a step back, she ventured one last glance at the woman who had loved her every moment of her life. Tressa's mother died in childbirth and her father had left through the fog. Like all of the others, three a year for the last sixty-seven years, none of them returned. Two hundred and one souls lost to the unforgiving fog, looking for a way out of the misty prison that had held Hutton's Bridge for eighty years.

Tressa was next.

Chapter 2

Tressa stepped out into the dappled light of mid-morning, closing the door behind her. A crowd had gathered outside the modest cottage, waiting for word. The wisps of fog kissed her cheeks, not letting Tressa forget it was her turn to disappear into it the next day.

“She’s gone.” Tressa pushed through the crowd, ignoring their keening. Granna’s death meant the end of an era. Without her first-hand stories of the day the fog fell, Hutton’s Bridge would never be the same. Without Granna, there was no solid proof. There were only legends and fears and the possibility that nothing was left outside the fog.

It was as if Granna’s death would leave them all orphans in a world that had forgotten them, had trapped them inside a barrier they couldn’t obliterate. Granna was their anchor, but the rope holding them to her had just been severed.

For Tressa it meant so much more. Granna was the only family she had left.

A hand caught Tressa’s arm. She looked up into Bastian Mercer’s emerald eyes. A shock of bright red hair stood straight up, sweat drenched his shirt. She shrugged off his hand, and continued through the crowd. She knew what was coming next and wouldn’t waste even a moment on grief when Granna’s entire legacy was about to be destroyed.

She pushed open the thick wooden door to the cottage of the man she hated most. Unlike the door to her home, this one was smooth and oiled, not a sliver in sight. It wasn’t just well kept, it was an overt sign to everyone in the village that the occupants were better than everyone else.

“She’s gone,” Tressa announced as she strode into the cottage.

A man sat at a polished stone table. He wiped his hands over his plate, then delicately licked the tip of each fingertip while glancing up at her. Tressa’s stomach turned. Every gesture he made came off as lascivious. He had offered to couple with her more than once, assuring her that he could get her belly to swell with his seed. Tressa had successfully avoided him, with the help of Granna. For an old woman,

she had been formidable. Her small stature belayed her inner strength.

"Then I will call a council meeting." Udor stood, pushing his chair away from the table with his ample arse. "Now that Sophia's gone, we can start to make better decisions about the future of our village. No more weeping about the past. No more attempts at escape. It's time we move away from silly tales and make a future for ourselves here."

Tressa held back a sigh. The last thing she wanted was to be sent out into the fog, never to return. But Granna hadn't even been dead for an hour. Surely a meeting could wait until people were given the chance to mourn her. She'd only given Udor the courtesy of a personal notification because he would be the next leader, not because she wanted to escape the fog.

"Dear Tressa." He ambled over to her, his arms outstretched. She stood still, stiffly, not accepting or rejecting the hug he bestowed upon her. She forced herself to remain neutral. "Why did you come to me so quickly, if not to start the process of changing our laws? You don't want to leave. I can make that requirement go away. You can stay here, live a long life with a boy you fancy." He leaned over, his lips tickling the edge of her ear. "Or with me. You cannot be my first wife, but you could be my second. No one else will have you now. Nineteen and no children? You're too old for one of the eligible young men. Forgo the surname of Webb and take River. Just say the word, and I, and my name, are yours."

Tressa recoiled, heaving out of his embrace. She didn't want him, never had, but he knew, as well as everyone else in the village, that she didn't want to put one toe into the fog. No one did.

Yet no one ever stood up to Granna's rule.

She was a gentle woman, but crossing her was a mistake. Anyone who did paid for it with their lives. Maybe not their own, but their child, being sent into the fog. Granna was ruthless in her decisions, never second-guessing herself, never allowing anyone to question her. After all, she was the only one left, the only one who remembered the day the village was trapped behind the misty wall.

"I only thought you should hear it from me," Tressa said. She couldn't look him in the face. Instead, she stared at her leather slippers. The long toe with the curl at the end of his shoe nearly touched the tip of hers. She shuffled backward, putting more distance between them. "Granna's death will mean many things to many people. As the new leader of our village, I came to you first."

Udor had long ago declared himself Granna's successor. Though Granna had never openly agreed to it, she privately told Tressa that no one else had the influence to lead their people into a new future. It was Udor, or it was no one, no matter how disgusting.

Maybe that's why Granna had been so insistent on Tressa leaving

during her nineteenth year. She never wanted Udor to touch her great granddaughter.

Udor stroked the length of Tressa's long raven hair. "I am ruler now, aren't I? And you were supposed to leave tomorrow. You don't have to go. Say the word and I will make sure you never have to worry about leaving the safety of our village again."

Tressa backed away, fumbling for the door. "I must attend to Granna's body now. Make sure everything is done properly."

"Of course, of course. I will call a council meeting before sunset to determine the new course of our village." His caterpillar eyebrows came together and his eyes narrowed. "Our fates have all changed this day."

Tressa nodded, then let herself out. She slammed the door behind her. Leaning up against it, her chest rose and fell at a rapid pace. She dropped her head, rested her face in her hands, and let the tears fall unbidden.

"Are you okay," a tender voice asked.

Tressa looked up, her hair covering her soaked cheeks. "Bastian." She took in a deep, shuddering breath, attempting to calm herself. He'd already reached out to her once, and she'd shrugged him away. He shouldn't be following her. Not today. Not ever. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine. Granna just died..."

"Don't call her that." Tressa shot an irritated look at Bastian. "She wasn't your family. She was mine. Like everyone else in this rat-infested village, you can refer to her as Sophia."

"Tressa, don't do this. Not now." He reached out, but fell short of actually touching her arm.

She glanced at his fingers. Dirt was embedded under the nails of his strong hand. She knew without looking how muscular his arms were. Following the contours of his limbs would only remind her of what she could never have again. She hadn't just coupled with Bastian. She had loved him deeply since she was just a little girl. As children, he'd brought her daises from the meadow, promising her that someday they'd be married. All he had to do was get her with child.

But he hadn't. Vinya had been the willing recipient of his seed. The bearer of his daughter. His bond-mate for life. Tressa's barren womb had sealed their fate a few years ago when she didn't get pregnant during their sanctioned time together. Granna had comforted her through it. Every morning, they drank tea, laughing at first about how lucky Tressa had been to pull Bastian's ribbon from the basket. As time went on, and Tressa showed no sign of pregnancy, their morning ritual turned to one of quiet sadness. Then acceptance when their three months together expired. That was when Vinya pulled his

ribbon. Within a month, her courses had stopped and she was successful at what Tressa could never do.

Tressa had somehow skipped over the part where she felt anger. There was only a deep, abiding sadness. One she couldn't stomach in Bastian's presence.

"I have to take care of Granna's body." Tressa moved to the side. Granna's death, Udor's advances, and now Bastian's concern. She needed to get away, but living in a trapped village, there was nowhere she could go to be alone.

"Uncle Adam is already there. One of the children was sent to fetch him after you emerged from the cottage. He will care for Sophia, just as he's cared for all of our dead since you and I were just children." Bastian's eyes softened. They'd always reminded Tressa of the meadow in spring. The same meadow where he'd picked flowers for her. The meadow where she shared her first kiss. Not just with Bastian, but with anyone. His eyes held too many memories for her.

"Still, she is my only kin. I should be there. Watch over her. If you'll excuse me." Tressa picked up her dress a little to keep it away from her feet, then took off in a run. Away from Bastian and Udor. Toward the only person who'd so intimately shared her past and future, and now had left Tressa alone and adrift.

Arriving outside her cottage in a cloud of dust and dirt, Tressa was glad to see the crowd had dispersed. The shock of Granna's death would wear off quickly. It was expected, had been for many years now. Yet she'd managed to hang on. Many whispered it was her will to raise Tressa that kept her alive. But Tressa knew different. It was Granna's heart's desire to see them escape from their village. Deep in her soul, she believed they'd find a way out. She wanted to live to see it with her own eyes.

Whether it was for vindication for all of the people she'd sent to their deaths beyond the fog, or because her fighting spirit wouldn't give up until she'd reunited her people with those who'd left them behind, Tressa wasn't sure. Granna never expressed her feelings on those she sent into the fog. She refused to speak of it and Tressa had stopped asking many years ago. While Granna's joy was infectious, and Tressa loved reveling in it, her silence carried the weight of the world, a weight Tressa knew she wasn't strong enough to bear.

And now that she was alone, she had a choice to make. Allow Udor to influence the council and cancel the yearly trek into the fog or believe in Granna's deathbed ramblings, that somehow Tressa was destined to leave and, perhaps, to survive?

Chapter 3

Bastian watched Tressa run away. Same as always. Unless their best friend Connor was there, Tressa wouldn't stand in Bastian's presence any longer than necessary. Not even today, when she needed him.

He turned to the direction of his cottage, not eager to go home. He'd been at the forge for a couple hours, pounding out metal for the farmers' tools. He was ready for a break, but hearing of Sophia's death was not what he anticipated for the day.

Bastian's intention had been to grab a snack and a long drink of water, but going back to his cottage meant facing his wife.

They had come together the same way every other couple in the village had. Once the council checked the lineage charts, they placed ribbons with the eligible men's names written on them. The woman would choose a ribbon and that man would be her mate for three months. If the woman conceived, they were bonded. If not, the process began again.

Bastian had his chance with Tressa. He'd loved her too and when it was confirmed she hadn't conceived, both of their worlds fell apart. They were forced to move on with others. His coupling with Vinya was successful the first month – and he'd hated himself every moment of it. It felt like a betrayal.

He walked through the town, invisible to everyone despite his height and red hair. Silence was his way and people had learned to ignore him. They spoke in whispers, everyone concerned with what was to come next. Bastian couldn't be bothered with it. As long as the fog surrounded Hutton's Bridge, nothing mattered. He was trapped.

The door swung open before he could place hand on the handle.

"Bastian. You're late. I've had your snack waiting for some time. Why can't you ever do anything right?" Vinya sighed and stepped out of the way. Her eyes, so accusing, raked down his chest. "And you're filthy. Can't you ever remember to wash before coming home? I work so hard to maintain this dump you call a cottage, just so my daughter and I have a decent place to live. Maybe you could be respectful of us for once?"

Bastian nodded. He'd learned long ago that words wouldn't soothe her feral soul. Vinya was determined to strip away any semblance of manhood he had. At first he found her attitude amusing. Now he wished her lips would fall off.

Ignoring her huffing, he sat down at the table next to his daughter, Farah. "How are you, baby girl?" He ruffled her curls.

Vinya slapped him on the shoulder. "Don't touch her with your filthy hands."

"Good, Papa." Farah ignored her mother too. At two, she'd already learned to cope with the circumstances. "Wanna nut?" She held out a walnut in her tiny hand.

Bastian's fingertips were almost as big as her palm. He plucked the nut and tossed it in the air, catching it in his mouth. Farah squealed and clapped.

"Again! Again!" She scrambled for another nut.

Vinya slapped Farah's backside with the broom bristles. "Stop it, now. Go lay down for a nap." Farah nodded, dropped a quick kiss on Bastian's cheek, and ran through the door to her little room.

"You don't have to be so harsh with her, Vinya." Bastian said between mouthfuls of bread. "She's still a baby."

"Speaking of babies..." Vinya sat down at the table next to him. "It's about time we try to conceive a second. Our village needs children to survive." She reached out, running her fingertips along his arm. "It's been so long since –"

Bastian looked up at her. Vinya had loosened her top. She dipped her chin and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Long ago, that move worked. He was younger. More eager. Trying to drown out his frustration about losing Tressa.

Now he didn't want anything to do with Vinya.

"Sophia died."

Vinya's hand snapped back as if he'd burned her. "Finally. That woman was too old. Taking up resources the rest of us need."

Bastian held back the urge to slap her. He'd never raised a hand to anyone, much less Vinya, but there were moments he fantasized about it. "She was loved deeply by many in this village."

Vinya snorted.

"What?" He asked even though he knew he shouldn't.

"You're only worried about your precious little Tressa. Just like always." Vinya stood up and continued sweeping the floor. The dirt among the rushes didn't stand a chance against her fury. "Well, after tomorrow that won't be a problem anymore. Maybe once the fog swallows her, you'll be back in my bed. She'll be forgotten and we can finally have a proper marriage."

Bastian stood up, wiped the crumbs off his hands over the plate,

and placed it in the washbin. He scrubbed with the cloth, sure he would wear a hole in the metal plate. "You shouldn't speak of death like that."

It had been gnawing on his soul. Every day since Tressa's name was chosen three months ago. He'd sought her out repeatedly, but never had the strength to say what he wanted. That he missed her. He loved her. He wanted her to stay in the village and live a long life even if he could never touch her again.

"I can't wait for Tressa to die." Vinya stood defiant, her hands clutching the broom's handle. "I'll finally have you all to myself."

Bastian glared at Vinya. "You will never have me. Never again. You make me sick." He tossed the plate on the table. It slipped and fell to the floor. Neither made a move to pick it up. Bastian strode across the room and through the doorway. He slammed the door behind him, not caring who saw.

She'd gone too far.

Chapter 4

Tressa stepped into the cottage she'd grown up in. The dark wooden walls had always formed a cocoon of happiness for her and Granna. The joyous air in their home had been sucked into Granna with her final inhalation. She probably hadn't meant to take it with her. Or maybe it had wafted out of her with each exhalation, and now that she was gone, it wouldn't enter again.

Adam stood over her great grandmother, rubbing oil into her skin, bringing back the luster that had left her. "She'll look exactly as she did before her death," Adam said without looking over his shoulder. His red hair seemed dull in the dim light. "During the public viewing, everyone will remember her just as she was. You, unfortunately, will only remember the way she looked at the moment of her death." He wasn't one to offer lies for comfort. Tressa appreciated it.

"I assumed as much." She made her way around the table to Granna's bedside. Yes, Adam had brought some color back to Granna's face. She would make a good showing to the people of Hutton's Bridge. They would remember her fondly. "While I hope someday that memory will fade, the way her chest collapsed, and the life flew out of her, I won't ever regret a moment of it. Granna was my only family. I'm glad I was there for her in her last moments."

Adam wiped his hand on a towel hanging from the waist of his breeches. "Need a hug?" He held his arms out.

Tressa hadn't known her father. He'd volunteered to enter the fog after her mother died. Adam never had children of his own, so he became a bit of a father figure to Tressa. She stepped into his embrace, laying her head on his shoulder. Even though he was Bastian's uncle, they looked nothing alike, except for their red hair. Adam was thin where Bastian was muscular, short where Bastian was tall. Yet they both held such special places in her heart.

Memories crashed through her mind. At six, she fell off a fence and skinned her knee. Adam had carried her back to Granna's cottage, wiping her tears with his sleeve. He'd been kind and gentle to her when others hadn't. They'd been too busy with their own families, their own children, to help out an orphan.

Nothing was more important in her village than family. They kept careful records of lineages, to ensure their lines remained untainted. With such a small population of only a couple hundred, it would be too easy to interbreed. Since they had no way of bringing in new people, each coupling was engineered. Yes, they chose a ribbon from a basket, but the ribbons weren't placed by chance. It was carefully done, with forethought and planning.

Adam rubbed Tressa's back, bringing her to the present. "We'll all miss Sophia. She may have been a bit of a tyrant, but she had a good heart."

Tressa stepped back, placing a hand on Granna's. It was now crossed over her stomach with her other arm. A pose of no return. She wasn't far enough gone yet to be chilled, but without the life searing through her veins, she felt no more alive than the clothes Tressa wore.

"I know she did. Udor's going to try to change things. He might outlaw entering the fog."

Adam opened his mouth, then hesitated. "You're supposed to be a part of it tomorrow, right?"

Tressa nodded without looking at Adam. She straightened Granna's light linen dress. Summer or winter, Granna still wore the same type of dress. It was as if she didn't feel the cold.

"I am." Tressa motioned at Granna. "Do you mind if I do her hair? She didn't feel up to it this morning."

"Of course. People might not recognize her without it."

Adam had already swept Granna's thick hair over her shoulder. Tressa weaved Granna's hair in an intricate pattern Granna had spent her life perfecting. She'd taught it to Tressa as a young girl. She'd spent hours practicing with ribbons to get the pattern just right.

When Granna said Tressa could try it on her own hair, she'd gotten nervous and tangled it up so badly that Granna couldn't fix it. Tressa had cried as Granna chopped her dark hair off. It fell to the floor in clumps.

"No need for tears," Granna had told her. "Hair always grows back."

But it wasn't the growing back that concerned Tressa. She'd just turned thirteen and realized her feelings for Bastian were more than that of childhood friends. Later in the day, he'd told her he was glad her hair was short because it made her look less like a girl.

Tressa had slapped him, burst into tears, and tried to run away. Bastian grabbed her wrist, pulling her back to him. "I'm glad because now the other boys may not look at you the same way I do. I want you all to myself."

That was the moment he'd first laid his lips on hers. A salty, sweet mix of gentle yearning, coupled with the innocence of youth. It lasted

only a few seconds, but long enough to solidify itself in Tressa's mind as the best kiss she'd ever have.

After the kiss, they'd awkwardly stared at each other until Tressa couldn't handle it anymore and ran away. Kissing someone who hadn't been chosen for coupling was against the law. Children who were caught doing it got in trouble with their parents and Granna. If Tressa and Bastian had been caught, Granna would have been furious. She indulged Tressa, but she also expected her to follow the rules.

"It's a beautiful braid," Adam said.

Yes, the braid looked exactly as it should. She'd learned a lot in the last few years when it came to weaving. That was the way Tressa contributed to their village. Everyone had a job. There was no payment, or money, though they still had a stockpile of it from the days before the fog fell.

"Thanks. It's the result of many years of practice."

Adam tapped the patterned vest he wore over his linen shirt. "Oh, I know. This is my favorite vest."

A blush crept across Tressa's cheeks. She actually enjoyed her work, unlike most of the others her age who complained about their jobs. She took pride in creating something beautiful out of raw materials. "I'm glad you like it."

Tressa took another look at Granna. Everything was as it should be. There were no elaborate rites for burial anymore. About fifty years ago, the elders decided they no longer had enough land to bury the dead. The new ritual was a public viewing the same day as death, then passing the body into the fog next to the old cemetery. They had tried burning the dead, but the stench was too much to bear. The fog was their only alternative. It swallowed them whole, erasing their existence in the wink of an eye.

"Are you ready for this, Tressa? To lay her to rest?"

She wasn't. She would never be. But she knew the practicalities of keeping a dead body around too long. Her grief didn't outweigh anyone else's. She had to do what everyone else in the village had done in the past.

"Yes." It was a lie, but an expected one.

Adam pulled a shroud over Granna's body. He opened the door and motioned. Three men stepped in, Connor, Geoff, and Sean. Together, they lifted the pallet under Granna. Tressa held the door open for Adam. They carried Granna's body out into the village toward the stone slab in the middle of the main courtyard.

People stood to the side, respectfully allowing the procession to continue unhindered. A bell sounded, calling everyone to the town square. Those who hadn't heard of Granna's passing would know soon enough. It didn't take long for gossip to spread and by the time

everyone arrived at the town square, they would all be prepared to see Granna's body lying there.

Tressa looked ahead. The elders had already gathered around the stone. Udor stood at the head. His expression was carefully set in place. It was one of sadness and concern. Tressa saw past the small smirk attempting to escape from the corner of his mouth. His eyes sparkled, knowing he was finally to become the ruler of the village. He wouldn't have dared to challenge Granna, but with her gone, no one would try to usurp him. It was a peaceful village out of necessity. Anyone who broke the laws repeatedly was forced into the fog, a fate more frightening than death.

Adam directed the others to lay Granna's body carefully on the stone. Her shroud fluttered in the breeze, slapping the sides of the slab.

They stood awkwardly for a few minutes, waiting for the last of the villagers to gather in the square. Tressa refused to look at Udor, but wouldn't allow herself to look at Granna, for fear the tears would return. Instead she looked out into the crowd, locking eyes with Bastian.

She allowed herself only one moment of weakness. He stood quiet. Solid. Tressa let herself drown in his sympathetic eyes, remembering the day he'd first kissed her and wishing with all of her heart that she'd have the chance again, one day, to let herself love another.

"This is a sad day for the village." Udor's voice boomed over the crowd. "We have lost one of our founding mothers. Truly, Sophia was a mother to all of us. Let us have a moment of silence to remember how she graced Hutton's Bridge with her love and caring."

Tressa wanted to kick him in the gut or punch him in the mouth, anything to get him to shut up. He'd never even liked Granna. No one loved her like Tressa had. She glanced through the people crowded in the square, their eyes lowered, some with their hands folded in prayer. Tressa wished for it all to be over, but she knew there were at least a few more hours she had to bear.

During the viewing, anyone who wanted could walk by Granna's body. They might linger only for a moment, but in some cases, people would stop for a long while. Probably worried about their own mortality. To Tressa, it was torture. Everyone in her village knew everyone else, but no one knew Granna like she did.

"Take your time saying goodbye," Udor continued.

Tressa drew her eyes away from the crowd to stare at him.

"In the meantime, I will be meeting with the elders to discuss the future of our village." With that final declaration, Udor spun on one heel, his cape floating behind him, and strode into the meeting hall.

Tressa itched to run after him. Her fate depended on their

decisions. The next day she would either step into the fog never to return, or stay put in a village that was suffocating her.

Chapter 5

Sunset was a strange time in Bastian's village. The horizon was

blocked by the fog, so the closer the sun traveled to setting, the fog turned a salmon color, just like the fish they cared for in the pond. It left their village bathed in an unsettling glow. They rarely had this much sun in the cool nights of late summer. Usually the sky was shrouded in low clouds, sealing the village in a tomb of misty tendrils.

Tressa's eyes were trained on the fog. He knew what was going through her mind without even asking. He stood off to the side, sure she didn't notice him.

She turned her attention back to Sophia's prone body. "Oh, they're gone." Her voice carried over to where he was standing. She was right. Everyone except Connor, Sean, Geoff, and Adam had left.

"We're going to put her to rest now. Do you want to come?" Adam beckoned to the younger men.

"I can't," Sean said. "I promised my mother I'd get back to work." He turned to Tressa. "I'm so sorry." He gave her an awkward hug, then took off in the opposite direction.

Adam looked around and saw Bastian. With two fingers cocked in the air, Adam motioned him over. Bastian looked to Tressa, but she'd already started toward the fog. If she wouldn't object, then he was more than willing to help.

Bastian took over Sean's position near Sophia's feet. Connor and Adam took the lead. Tressa walked three paces in front of them. Sophia's braid hung off the side.

The grass stood taller the closer they got to the fog.

Adam held his palm up. Connor, Geoff, and Bastian brought Sophia to a careful halt.

They all looked at Tressa, all except Bastian who looked at Tressa's feet.

"Is there anything you want to say before we commend her to the fog?" Adam asked.

"Can I have a moment alone with her?" Tressa asked.

Adam nodded. They removed Sophia from the pallet and set her down gently on the ground, her back against a large rock.

Tressa took Sophia's hand in hers again. She leaned over to whisper in her ear.

Bastian wanted to go to her side, lay a hand on her back, steady her, but Tressa wouldn't have allowed it. The last thing he wanted was to interfere where he wasn't wanted. If they had still been bonded, he knew his place would be next to her.

Tressa paused for a moment, just breathing, as if Sophia might speak if she hesitated long enough. Sophia's chest remained still. Her eyelids didn't flutter. It really was all over.

Tressa stumbled backward, a hand over her pink lips and a waterfall gushing down her cheeks. Bastian held out his arms. She fell into them, not even noticing who held her. Tressa's head fell onto his chest, her eyes focused only on Sophia's body as Adam scooped her tiny grandmother into his arms. His toes touched the fog and his arms passed through the tendrils of gray mist until he seemed armless. Her body disappeared. There was no noise. They didn't know where the bodies went or if they lay just beyond their grasp. It was the way of the fog.

Bastian held tighter as Tressa's trembles turned to gasping breaths.

"I love you."

It was only a whisper. Bastian was sure he was the only one who'd heard Tressa tell Sophia one last time how much she meant to her.

Adam stepped backward, his arms empty. He turned around. "I'm so sorry, Tressa."

She nodded. Her muscles relaxed. She turned her head and saw it was Bastian holding her so tenderly. Tressa gasped and ran off toward the village, taking Bastian's heart with her.

Chapter 6

Tressa stumbled into the town square. She'd run from the edge of the village to get away from the memory of Granna disappearing into the fog and from Bastian's embrace.

She nearly steadied herself on the slab where Granna had lain, but stopped just short of touching the cold stone. It was too soon. Time would never heal her wound of losing Granna. She was alone in a village with no family and no way to escape.

"Ah, you're back." Udor strolled out of the gathering hall, his hands looped into the belt cutting into the flab around his waist. His gray goatee trailed down his chin into a point just above the potato bobbing in his throat. "Everyone else has just left. I was closing up the hall and blowing out the candles. Would you like to join me?"

Tressa hesitated, but only for a moment. With or without Granna, life would go on. Better to face it now than put off the inevitable. She nodded, dipping her chin only once, and followed Udor back into the hall.

Wax dripped from candles, forming valleys and rivulets along the wooden shelves. The scent of beeswax hung in the air. Before the fog fell, Hutton's Bridge had been known for their honey. Granna told stories of exotic travelers coming in and out of the town just to buy it. Their clothes made of silk in colors as bright as the flowers dotting the meadow. Languages Granna didn't understand mingled with the accents of high society from the castle. Tressa loved it when Granna imitated the lilting, high-pitched accents.

"We've come to a unanimous decision." Udor wound his way around the table in the center of the room, blowing out candles as he passed them. Three stood next to Tressa, flickering light in the drafty room.

She didn't ask what that decision was and she doubted it was unanimous without some struggle or bribery. At least two of the elders had been fiercely loyal to Granna, even in the face of dissent. They'd never wavered in their conviction. Until today.

"You don't have to leave now, Tressa. You can stay here in the village."

Her heart lurched. She didn't want to stay. Staying meant seeing Bastian with Vinya. Staying meant living alone in the cottage she'd shared with Granna her whole life. Staying meant never seeing if Granna's visions were real.

But she didn't want to leave unless she knew there was something other than death waiting for her in the fog. She belonged nowhere.

"I meant what I said this morning." He cupped her cheek. She'd been so busy thinking she hadn't even noticed he'd sidled up next to her. His thumb rubbed her chin, and then he grabbed it, hard, forcing her to look at him. "I will take you in. No one else will and you know that as well as I do. The entire goal of our village is to keep life going for our people. A woman who cannot bear children has no use. She consumes resources others need to survive. Don't think anyone will take pity on you because you were related to Sophia."

He pinched her chin. If she'd had any tears left to cry, they might have inched out of her eyelids. But she was a dry husk now, unable to respond.

"It may not happen tomorrow or next month, but eventually everyone will start to look at you out of the corner of their eyes. They will wonder why they are crowding seven to eight people in a home when you sit in luxury, enjoying all that space for yourself. Eventually, they will find a way to get rid of you, whether by poison or setting up an unfortunate accident."

It had happened in the past, and only to the single people. No one publicly questioned those unnatural deaths. They simply accepted them for what they were – survival strategies for the majority. No one ever took responsibility for the deaths. No one ever asked.

Adam was an exception. He had never been bothered because of his healing skills. He saved the lives of others, but it also helped to ensure his own.

Udor's hand dropped to his side. Tressa's chin throbbed as the blood rushed back. She didn't dare reach up and massage it.

"If you're under my protection, you will have nothing to fear." He wouldn't stop. She wondered if he was trying to convince her, or himself.

"Adam might take me in. He's been more of a father to me than anyone in this village." Tressa chose her words carefully. The last thing she needed was for Udor to think she had romantic feelings for Adam.

Udor's smile fell, erased from his face. "You don't need a father. You need a husband."

Tressa's eyes narrowed. Did he really think it was necessary to do this now? If the elders had agreed to stop the chosen three from venturing into the fog, then Tressa would have time to figure things

out. She wouldn't have a random man as her husband, not for pity, and not for Udor's twisted desires.

"So I don't have to prepare to leave tomorrow?" Tressa chose to ignore his entreaties. She would never be his. Never.

Udor glared at her. He knew better than to force her into something against her will. The townspeople may not appreciate her using up resources when their children might need them, but they wouldn't stand for forcing a woman into coupling.

In such a small place, the criminals were few and far between. Jealousy, conniving, and persuasion all ran rampant, but no one dared cross the line of propriety. The sentence for crime was simple: banishment into the fog, blindfolded and bound. In case there was life out there, they had to fight to find it, hampered by their bindings. But they wouldn't be allowed to stay in the village. There was no offer for rehabilitation.

"I've saved your life." Udor opened the door to the hall, holding his arm out to the side. "Maybe you should think on that tonight."

Tressa held her head high, and strode out the door. She did have much to think about. In less than a day, everything had changed. Just yesterday she had thought she was moving toward death in the fog. Then Granna suddenly fell ill and passed. She hadn't been prepared for that. Now Tressa had her reprieve.

Everything was backward. She didn't know which way to turn. Her cottage looked the same, but empty.

Tressa lay down in her bed, pulling the covers up tight to her chin. The only light came from the faint moonlight that tore through the fog's unrelenting veil. She rolled over, scooting against the wall. Something scratched her back. Tressa reached a hand behind her, and was surprised to find a worn piece of parchment crumpled up between the bed and wall.

Tressa set the paper on her lap and lit a bedside candle. Bringing the candle closer to the parchment, she squinted in an attempt to read it.

Age had cut into the folds of the parchment, slicing through image. Orange foxing framed the edges. It was a faded picture of a man, bound in a tree. Shock pulsed in her veins.

Tressa had never seen this before. All of the documents they held at Hutton's Bridge were kept in the hall, guarded under lock and key. Long ago, the elders had taken this step to preserve their past. They'd lost the ability to purchase parchment after the fog fell. Most in the newer generations didn't know how to read or write. It wasn't important anymore. But Granna had taken great pains to teach Tressa.

At the bottom of the picture, a hastily written message stood. Smudged, it looked like it had been written with a stick and the

remnants of the black soot on the end of a candle's wick. Tressa glanced at the candle in her other hand. The wick listed to the side.

She held the parchment up to the candle, careful not to catch it on fire.

Tressa,

My visions were about you. You must enter the fog. It is your destiny. It was my intention to live long enough to see you through the fog and welcome you back into my arms when you returned, but this sudden illness has rendered me weak.

I love you always. Never forget this. I have always followed my heart. All I can do is ask that you do the same.

Granna

Visions. Not that again. Tressa sighed and folded up the note. Granna had been further gone than she'd thought. No one returned from the fog. Ever. There was no reason to think Tressa would be any different.

Chapter 7

The gong of the town bells woke Tressa from a deep sleep.

Images of Granna flickered in and out of her memory, but the shouts outside her door roused her quickly. Tressa shimmied into her dress, pulling it over her underclothes. She tied a woven belt around her waist, one of her own design, gathered her hair into a sloppy ponytail, and ran out the door.

Three more dead bodies rested in the town square. A knot formed in Tressa's throat. Granna's illness. Now more were dead.

Tressa walked over to Mariah, her neighbor. "Who died?"

"I don't know yet. I still need to feed the baby before I can go and see. I sent Marcus, but he hasn't come back yet." As if to back up her story, Mariah's baby cried out from inside the house. "You'll excuse me?"

Tressa nodded, but Mariah didn't wait to see what she said. The baby's needs were more important. Tressa understood that. It didn't make it any easier, though. She'd slowly grown away from all of her friends as they coupled and had babies. They said Tressa couldn't understand their lives anymore. She wasn't sure any of them ever gave her a chance.

With a shake of her head, Tressa threaded her way through the gathered crowds. She bumped elbows, but before she could apologize, she was pulled to the side. Connor had a strong grip on her arm. Tressa didn't struggle. If he needed to talk to her, then she was more than willing to listen.

"Don't go over there," he whispered in her ear. Connor tugged lightly on her arm, pulling her to the side of the village hall. They stood in the shadow of the tallest building in the village, hidden from any prying eyes.

"What's going on?"

"Three more are dead. There's some kind of plague spreading. No one knows where it came from."

"Why are you pulling me to the side to tell me this? If everyone knows, why all the whispering?" Tressa knew Connor didn't do anything without good reason. He was solid, dependable. The last

person to overreact to anything.

“Some are blaming you.”

Tressa took in a breath. “Me? What could this possibly have to do with me?” Her hand fluttered over her chest. A few years ago, another illness had spread through the village. One of the men who tended the cattle had purposely let the villagers eat tainted meat. Only after people had died did he confess his sin. He’d believed no one would get hurt, even though he’d seen the sores on the cattle before slaughtering it.

In a village with little in the way of medicine, health was held as one of the most important things to maintain. One terrible plague could kill them all.

“Since Sophia fell sick and died the night before you were supposed to leave, the whispers say that you poisoned her in an effort to save yourself. Everyone knows how Udor looks at you. He’s your only salvation from the fog.”

Anger swept through Tressa’s veins, setting her heart on fire. “Anyone who thinks I would kill Granna to avoid the fog is crazy. I would never do that!”

“I know that. You know that.” Connor shook his head and ran his fingers through his sandy hair. “But not all of them know that.”

Tressa knew that was true. Sophia was the only remaining person who was alive when the fog descended. Some people revered her. Others mistrusted her. No one knew the truth anymore. At some point, history morphed into fable. The ramblings of one old woman were seen less as fact than mythology – a mythology that permeated the one tradition everyone feared.

“I would have left. I prefer that to one moment in Udor’s arms.”

Connor laughed, muffling it behind a hand. “I don’t think any of us could stand that, Tressa.” He slipped an arm around her shoulder. “Look, I will protect you as best as I can. I’ve already defended you more than once. You can count on me to be here for you.”

Tressa nodded, grateful she had such a good friend. She was also thrilled his first coupling had produced a child.

“Is Hazel okay with that?”

Connor nodded. “She understands. She was already prepared for me to leave with you and Geoff today. Unlike some people, Hazel believed Sophia. She wants our children to grow up outside of this village. If I can be one of the people who brings that about, then there’s nothing I could do to make her prouder.”

“You have a good woman, Connor.” Tressa’s heart squeezed. She wanted to be that kind of partner for someone. Maybe someday.

A blush spread across Connor’s pale cheeks. He knew how lucky he was too. It wasn’t often that true love sprung forth from a chance

coupling.

“You do know Udor said we don’t have to leave now.”

Connor’s eyes flitted over to the gathering crowd. “I know. He came by late last night and told me. I didn’t get a wink of sleep.”

“Why?” Tressa didn’t sleep well either, plagued by disturbing dreams. Sometimes she felt like dreaming was just her mind working on all of her problems and fears. She certainly had enough to keep her busy right now between Granna’s death and Udor’s threats.

Connor shrugged. “I guess I’m not sure how I feel. I’ve been preparing myself, mentally and physically, to leave. The last few months have been hard, but I was ready.” He tapped his head and then his heart.

“I wish I was more like you. I’ve done nothing but worry. Probably because Granna wouldn’t stop talking about it every day. She was just as proud of me as Hazel is of you. Except I felt like it was a death sentence. I’ve done little to prepare.” A small, nervous laugh escaped her lips. “I guess I would have been dead weight to you and Geoff.”

“Oh, Tressa, you’re never dead weight. You’re twice as clever as I am in a tight spot.

Tressa rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I could weave a belt out of grass. Helpful, indeed.”

A keen rose out of the crowd on the other side of the building. A group of screams and clanging of swords followed.

“What the –”

Connor took off running, with Tressa on his heels.

Chapter 8

Tressa turned the corner of the village hall, out of breath. Arms

were never raised in Hutton's Bridge. In fact, as far as she knew, they were kept locked up in the village hall. No one had a reason to fight against anyone else in her little village. The scratch of steel on steel halted her in her tracks.

Connor ran ahead. "Bastian!"

Tressa stood on her toes, peering over the swarms of people watching the fight none of them had bothered to stop. Connor leapt onto Bastian's back, wrapping his arms under Bastian's, yanking him backward.

"Put it down," he begged his friend. Bastian had Connor by a few inches and a few dozen pounds. His muscles bulged, straining against Connor's unrelenting tugging. The sword he held was clean, unblemished. It was a virgin blade, never used in battle.

Tressa's stomach sank to her toes. No one was allowed to create new weapons. There were more than enough stored in the armory. Bastian's work in the forge was supposed to focus solely on essentials needed for the village, not on the production of weapons. He would be disciplined harshly. The stocks or maybe banishment into the fog. It depended on the elders' moods and Udor's sense of mercy.

Bastian tossed the sword at the other man. Tressa couldn't remember his name, but he was one of the many who worked in the fields, planting and harvesting the food they relied on so heavily. The man went back to guarding the three bodies lying prone for the viewing.

"I better not hear another word out of your mouth," Bastian said with a snarl in his throat. "You'll pay." Redness crept up his neck, matching the fiery hair on his head.

The other man laughed. "You're the one who's going to pay, boy. Where did you get that sword?"

"None of your concern." Bastian shrugged Connor off. He probably could have thrown him easily from the start, but he and Connor were great friends. Bastian knew better than to hurt those on his side.

Connor clapped Bastian on the shoulder. "Let's take a walk, okay?"

Tressa strained to hear the answer, but couldn't over the sound of the crowd. They'd gone from silent, watching the fight, to talking amongst themselves again. Crisis averted, they went back to worrying about the illness and the three dead. A few looked askance at Tressa. She remembered Connor's warning and slipped off into the shadows again.

She wrung her hands, not sure where to go or what to do. She could hide in her cottage until the anger waned. No one would think Tressa had done anything to purposely start an illness, not even if it meant cancelling the group set to leave through the fog. It was a stretch, even for the most paranoid person.

Looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was following, Tressa rounded the corner of the building, only to run into Bastian's chest. His hands grabbed her upper arms, helping her stay upright.

"Sorry." Tressa stepped backward, stumbling into the side of the building. Every time Bastian touched her, it was like being struck by lightning.

"We need to talk to you." Only then did she notice Connor standing next to Bastian.

"Oh, okay, um, I was just heading back to my cottage. Do you want to come with me?"

Connor nodded. Bastian followed a few paces behind the two of them. To anyone who noticed, it might look like Bastian was simply moving in the same direction as Connor and Tressa, not walking with them. The three of them knew it was better that way, without even communicating it explicitly.

Tressa opened the door to her cottage, holding it for both Connor and Bastian to slip inside. She glanced around. No one was paying attention to them, at least not that she could see.

She closed the door and leaned up against it. Connor sat at the table while Bastian paced the room. He hadn't been in her cottage in a couple of years and Tressa was struck by how he seemed to have outgrown it. A memory of playing cards at the table seemed like a different life, almost as if all of them had outgrown their little village.

"Connor, you already filled me in on what's going on out there. Bastian, do you want to tell me why you were fighting that man?"

"His wife just died." Bastian said it under his breath.

"What is wrong with you?" Tressa couldn't help herself. There wasn't one good reason he should snap at a man suffering grief like that.

"He blamed you. He said this was your fault. I was only defending you." Bastian stared at his shoes, unable to look Tressa in the eyes.

She took a step closer to him, then thought better of it. "Next time someone says something about me and you feel the need to fight back,

do it with words. Not with some sword you made in your free time.” Her blood boiled, the anger rising. “And what do you think you’re doing, making swords at the forge? You know what the punishment is for a crime like that!”

“I have to agree with her, Bastian.” Connor tapped his fingers on the table. “You’re writing your own death sentence.”

Bastian punched a fist into his palm. His biceps rippled and Tressa forced herself not to notice it. “You both know why I protected Tressa. Don’t act dense.”

“We’re not acting dense, Bastian.” Tressa sat down at the table with Connor, purposely distancing herself from him. “Our lives are not ours. We have to live within the confines of this village and its laws.”

Connor laughed. “You two really need to get over each other.”

Tressa shot him a glare that could have melted a table full of candles.

“It’s getting old,” Connor continued, “Yes, we all had these ideas of what we’d grow up to be. I certainly never expected to love Hazel, but I did. Guess what? I love her now. If the two of you would stop being so selfish about your feelings, you might discover there’s someone else here who could make you happy.”

Tressa wanted to sink under the floor, grind herself into specks of dirt that could never be swept from between the planks. Connor knew how they felt, but he’d never said it so boldly before. And even though both Tressa and Bastian refused to act on their feelings, sometimes to the point of making life awkward and miserable for everyone around them, neither of them could deny it either.

“I’m happy with Vinya,” Bastian mumbled under his breath. “She gave birth to my little girl. I will always be grateful for that.”

“Now that we’re no longer obligated to enter the fog, Tressa could continue coupling until she finds the right man,” Connor suggested. He bumped Tressa’s elbow.

“That’s easier said than done. I’ve been a part of coupling four times now. I haven’t conceived once. I think I’m barren.” Her voice lowered on the last word. Speaking it aloud, outside her cottage, would result in angry stares from other villagers. No one wanted to allocate resources to a woman who couldn’t help the village continue with her progeny. “Besides, I’m getting a little old for finding a husband, don’t you think?”

“It’s true. Many of the men our age have already been bonded. Tressa shouldn’t be forced into a relationship with a boy of fourteen or fifteen. It’s disgusting.” Bastian shook his head, then sat down next to Connor.

Tressa didn’t argue with his statement. She’d thought the same thing many times.

An awkward silence draped over the three friends.

"It would just be easier if I went into the fog," Tressa said with a resigned sigh. "There's nothing left for me here."

"It's suicide." Bastian sank into the chair.

She considered slipping Granna's note out from under her pillow. What if her rantings weren't far fetched? What if there was actually something to them? Even the image on the parchment gave Tressa pause. It was possible Granna knew more than she had ever told the others in the village. There were nights she'd leave and not come back for hours.

Tressa hadn't ever asked her about it. She'd waited, hoping Granna would confide in her. Tell her where she and her little owl friend, Nerak, would go in the darkness. She couldn't conceive of anything in the village being so important that Granna could only do it at night.

She'd kept Granna's secret her whole life. She wasn't comfortable sharing, not even with her best friends. Granna had told her to follow her heart, but it only led to Bastian. If she couldn't follow it, then perhaps it was best to move in the opposite direction.

"I will go tomorrow."

"Not alone." Connor put a hand on Tressa's arm. "I will go too and we should see if Geoff wants to go. No one should go into the fog alone."

"No." Tressa shrugged his hand off. "You have a wife and two sons. Geoff has a son. Don't be ridiculous."

"Just because the council has decided the group of three shouldn't go, doesn't mean we can't. There's a reason Sophia sent people out every year. Maybe it's our turn to find out why. Besides, we need medicine. Or a cure. Our village could become a ghost town without it."

Tressa couldn't help but smile. Connor always knew the right thing to say. She glanced over at Bastian and his brooding face. He didn't offer an opinion.

"We just have to be the first ones to succeed," Connor said.

Granna was gone. She knew Bastian could never be hers and she wouldn't come between a bonded couple. Staying meant giving in to Udor, either by becoming his concubine or suffering at his hands for refusing.

"I'm with you," Tressa said.

Chapter 9

Connor opened the door to Tressa's cottage. They'd planned to slink out unnoticed and find Geoff, to see if he would still leave with them. He'd been chosen and he'd been preparing just as they had. But when the door creaked open, a crowd milled around outside of Tressa's cottage.

"You!" Someone called out. "She's the one who started this."

Murmurs of assent traveled across the mob. Tressa intended to push past them all, but Connor nudged her gently to the side and held up both arms. "Come on, now. Do you really think that's true? Who started this rumor?"

Tressa strained to hear their response, but instead of one clear voice answering Connor, a new wave of rumors swirled.

"They're having an affair."

"No wonder they didn't want to leave."

"They did this to protect themselves."

"His poor wife."

Tressa nudged Connor. "Let me handle this. I don't want to damage your relationship with Hazel."

Connor laughed. "She won't believe a word of it. Hazel knows exactly where my heart is." He turned back, looking Tressa in the eyes. "She'd also encourage me to defend you."

"You're a lucky man."

"Don't I know it?" Connor winked. "Now help me make her proud."

Connor grabbed Tressa's hand and tugged. He pushed through the crowd, ignoring their growing cries for justice. Villagers grabbed at her dress and hair. She shrugged them off and tried keeping up with Connor. It wasn't easy. She tripped over the feet of the angry people surrounding them, but Connor's grasp didn't loosen. He continued to drag her along behind him toward the village square.

She brushed back her hair with her free hand, removing the veil falling around her face. It fell right back down and made it impossible to see. Tressa quickly wove her hair into a braid. She'd never tried with one hand before and was concerned her hair was knotting itself

into a mess she might not be able to fix later. Vanity forced her to slow her trembling fingers down. She didn't want to cut her hair off again.

The braid fell over Tressa's shoulder. She almost regretted making it. The angry eyes of the accusing villagers could make contact with hers. She saw the pain in their eyes. Some of them probably didn't want to blame her, but didn't know where else to focus their fear. Tressa didn't know how fast the plague was spreading, but it was clear that fear was spreading faster.

The crowd followed them through the village, their footsteps stamped behind Tressa. Sure, unending, determined. The ground transitioned from grass to dirt, signaling their proximity to the town square. Tressa gave Connor's hand one last squeeze, then let go. She wouldn't look like some kind of victim or criminal. She would stand proud and tell the truth, just like Granna had always taught her.

A hole opened ahead of them. Connor stood to the side, letting Tressa stand next to him. He'd taken her through the first part, but he knew her well enough to let her stand on her own in front of everyone.

The three bodies still rested in the middle of the square, but it was Udor, near the entrance to the village hall, who held everyone's attention.

"So they've decided to show their faces," he boomed across the square. "Maybe you'd care to tell us why people are dying, Tressa."

His glare ripped straight into her chest. So this was her punishment for refusing him. She hadn't realized he'd act so quickly, but it was possible the additional deaths gave him exactly the impetus he needed.

Tressa stood tall, elongating her spine out of the slump she'd been in since leaving her cottage. Her raven braid fell to her back, showing everyone her squared shoulders and firm stance.

"I plan to leave tomorrow. Just as Granna told me to do. Maybe I can find help." She looked out over the mob. A stunned silence blanketed the crowd.

"Preposterous!" Udor shouted, followed by a deep guffaw. "She's only hoping you will feel sorry for her. Convince her to stay. Make a martyr out of her. She has no plans to help anyone."

The crowd swung back to Udor. From the looks on their faces, it was clear they didn't know who to believe. Tressa spent most of her life away from the crowds, not attending most social events. She preferred to be home with Granna, weaving or just making conversation. Few in the village had really gotten to know her. Only Connor and Bastian knew her heart.

Tressa didn't bother to address Udor's ridiculous statement. There

was no point. People would either believe him or her.

“Don’t let her ramblings dissuade you from the truth,” Udor said. He strolled over to Connor and Tressa. “She’s only trying to save her own skin after murdering her great grandmother.”

Tressa’s anger boiled up and before she could think better of it, she stalked over to Udor and slapped his cheek. “How dare you? I loved Granna with all my heart. I would never have killed her.” Tressa took a deep breath, her chest rattling with the exhalation. It was too late to change her mind. She turned back to the villagers. “I’m going ahead with the plan. Connor and I have already agreed, we only need to confer with Geoff to see if he will go with us. We will find help from the outside and save all of you, even if you insist on listening to this lying bastard. Would he do that for you? Ask yourselves that question when you lie in your beds at night, fearing that the plague will kill you too.”

The crowd burst into angry shouts, but Tressa didn’t wait to see whose side they were on. Udor grabbed her arm, pulling her close to his lips. “How dare you say any of that?”

“What? Tell the truth?” she snarled in his face.

Connor grabbed Udor’s arm and squeezed until he let go of Tressa. “Don’t ever touch her like that again.”

“Why? Do you want her, boy? Is that what this is about? Just a ploy so the two of you can run away together?”

“You’re a sick old man, do you know that?” Connor dropped his arms to his sides, but his hands remained in fists. “Tressa is one of my best friends. But you wouldn’t understand that, would you? Have you ever had a real friend or just people who follow you around in fear?”

“We’re concerned about the safety of the village, Udor. Aren’t you?” Tressa asked. “You’re supposed to be the leader of the elders now that Granna is gone. Act like a leader, not a lecherous old man. Put the needs of your people ahead of your own.” Tressa folded her arms across her chest, daring him to put aside his own agenda.

Udor sneered. “No matter. The two of you will die soon enough once you enter that fog. There is no outside. Not to us. And there never will be. You want to enter the fog? Fine.”

Udor spun, kicking up a cloud of dirt, and stalked away. The angry crowd milled around them, but no one vocalized another accusation or protest. No one came out and supported Tressa and Connor either. Slowly they turned away, the line to view the dead reforming. Vengeance could wait until later.

“No one’s going to believe us.” Tressa rubbed her arms. “Why should they? We don’t even know what we’re talking about. He’s right. We’ll just die.”

“If you say Udor’s right, I’m going to encourage them to hang

you.” He nodded toward the crowd.

Tressa rolled her eyes. “That’s not going to happen.” She tugged on Connor’s shirt and started walking toward Geoff’s house. She hadn’t seen him in the crowd, so hopefully they’d still catch him at home. If not, they’d head out to the fields and see if he was harvesting the wheat.

“Good. I’d really have to wonder if you were sick too.” A frown crossed his face.

“What’s wrong?” Tressa asked. She picked up her step, anxious to find Geoff.

“If this really is a plague. If the things we’ve seen really do mean what we just told everyone, then my wife and sons are in danger. I have to protect them.” His face clouded over.

“If you want to stay,” Tressa said, puffing as she walked faster, “then stay. I wouldn’t hold it against you.”

“Staying won’t do any good. Our only chance is to find a way out.”

Tressa stopped abruptly in front of the door to Geoff’s cottage. A dark red swath of blood dripped from above the lintel. “Illness,” she whispered. She held a hand up, her fingertips just inches from the wet blood.

Chapter 10

Tressa knocked on the door, not heeding the warning left on the frame. The door slowly creaked open, a green eye the only thing they could see. “We’re sick. Go away.”

In the few times illness struck Hutton’s Bridge, the villagers left a warning to others outside their door. A slaughtered chicken and its blood spread over the doorway told everyone to stay away. Granna had never paid any attention, always willing to help any family who needed it.

“Let us in. We need to talk to Geoff,” Connor said, also uninterested in the warning.

“He’s sick,” the voice said again. It was so quiet, Tressa couldn’t tell if it was Geoff’s wife Brenna, or one of his children. Based on the height of the eye, she guessed one of his kids. “Go away. Save yourself. Momma’s dead. Not Papa, but he’s real sick.”

“Your mother is dead?” Tressa asked, slowly pushing the door open. The child stepped backward. “Do you want us to take her body out?”

“No,” Geoff’s voice came from the back of the dark cottage. “Leave her. It will only spread the illness further.”

“There are three bodies out in the town square right now,” Connor said. He squinted his eyes, peering back into the darkness. “Tressa and I are going to enter the fog. We came by to see if you would come with us.”

Tressa and Connor waited while a deep, barking cough pierced the air. Tressa’s eyes widened, seeking out Connor’s. They both knew Geoff wouldn’t be coming with them. A wet laugh followed the coughing. “I’ll be dead by nighttime. This is exactly how it went with Brenna.”

Tressa wanted to take little Lukas with her, but she knew he’d already been exposed. It would only help the plague spread faster through the village. Leaving him with his father was the logical thing to do, but it wasn’t right. Her heart ached, thinking of the young boy who’d seen his mother die and could only sit by and watch the same happen to his father.

She glanced down at the boy, his big green eyes wide. "Come with us. I can find a place for you to stay."

He shook his head, his brown hair flopping over his innocent eyes. "I can't leave my papa. I won't let him be alone. I saw how he took care of my momma. I want to do the same for him." Tears welled up in his eyes, but he held them back. In many ways he was stronger than some adults Tressa knew.

"If you need anything," Connor leaned over and whispered, "you can go to my cottage. My wife will take you in." Connor knelt down and drew a little map in the dirt with an X where his cottage sat.

The child nodded. He looked back over his shoulder at his father. "If he dies, I will probably die too."

It was a very adult statement for such a little one. Her resolve to leave the village only doubled. If there was any chance she could help, she had to do it.

"Hopefully not. You look strong and you're not sick right now. I bet you'll be just fine. Like me." Tressa ruffled his hair. She wasn't afraid to touch him. After all, she nursed Granna before she died, never even guessing her sudden illness would be so insidious or virulent.

There were too many unknowns, but it only made her want to work harder to find the answer.

"Tressa and I are going to find a cure, Geoff," Connor shouted back into the cottage.

Another wet cough came from the darkness. "Even if I was healthy, I'm not sure I would have gone with you voluntarily. I heard last night that it had been cancelled. Brenna and I were going to celebrate as soon as she felt better..." His voice trailed off, followed by a gasping sound. The little boy ran back into the cottage, the door swinging shut behind him.

Tressa moved to push the door open, to try to help, but Connor grabbed her arm. "Don't. There's nothing we can do for him now. You of all people know that. The best thing for us to do is to get out of here and find out where the plague is coming from and stop it from spreading."

Tressa gazed into Connor's eyes, trying to figure out if this was what he really wanted. His emerald eyes focused on hers, not once wavering. She saw strength, determination, and fear. It was the last one that made her question him. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. When I see Geoff's son, I can't help but think of Hazel and my own little boys. This isn't the ending I want for them. Even though going into the fog scares me, I'm willing to do it for them. Staying here is a death sentence. Who knows how many more people have been infected, or will be?"

“What if it’s already too late?” Tressa glanced back at the cottage as they walked away. She couldn’t get the image of that little boy out of her head. Alone and scared, but so brave. Did he even have a chance for survival?

“It’s not too late as long as people are still alive.” Connor didn’t need to convince Tressa with his magic. She knew his words rang true.

“So it’s just the two of us, then.” Her heart fluttered a little. She’d spent a year dreading it, had one night to be thankful she wouldn’t face it, and here she was back again to apprehension.

“No, it’s the three of us.”

Tressa spun on her heel. Bastian stood in the path behind her and Connor.

“You can’t go with us,” Tressa insisted. “You have a family.”

Bastian pointed at Connor with one finger. “He does too. And you’re more than willing to let him risk his life.”

She fought the urge to beat his chest with clenched fists. “Someone needs to stay and protect the village.”

“From what? A plague? Just how will I do that?” Bastian laughed. “Yes, I’m sure the sword I made will help with that. The truth is that my steel will do more protecting the two of you than anyone in this village.”

A loud screeching ripped through the morning air. All three looked up into the sky. Wings beat furiously from the broad body of an animal in flight, tearing through the veil of fog.

“What is that?” Tressa glanced over at Connor and Bastian. From their bewildered expressions, they knew about as much as she did.

Chapter 11

The flying creature, covered in turquoise and gray striped scales, hovered over the village square. Fire ripped out of its open jaws, bathing the misty sky in orange. Villagers screamed, running for cover in buildings or under trees. The beast strained, its neck gyrating in the air.

Bastian pulled the sword out of a sheath under his cloak. Tressa hadn't even noticed he'd been carrying it with him. If anyone saw, he'd be in trouble, especially after his scuffle earlier in the morning. The beast let forth another fiery breath and Tressa changed her mind. Bastian raced toward the flying lizard.

"What is that?" Tressa yelled to Connor over the villagers' screams.

"Don't know, but obviously it's not from here!" He ran after Bastian.

Bastian waved the sword in the air, pathetically far below the beast. Connor threw rocks. They hit the beast, raining down on the few shrieking villagers left in the town square. It screeched at them, but didn't come any closer, its wings flapping hard. The wind rushed around them in circles.

"Come down here and fight!" Bastian bellowed into the air. He stopped swinging his sword. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead.

Tressa grabbed a nearby rope and motioned to Connor. He tossed her a couple of larger rocks. She tied rope around them, making sure the knots were tight. Connor grabbed the rock and hurtled it toward the beast. After four tries, the rope looped over its back, dangling down to the ground from the other side.

"More!" Connor yelled. "Make three more, quickly!"

Tressa did as she was told, tying the rope as fast as she could. Bastian and Connor tossed them up over the beast, its head whipping around violently as if something far away held it in a leash.

Connor and Bastian each grabbed two of the ropes hanging from the beast. They yanked hard, pulling it down, closer to the ground. The beast sputtered, its head hanging down.

Udor stomped out of the village hall, waving his arms in the air. "Are you crazy? We need to find a way to get it away from here, not

bring it closer!”

Bastian and Connor ignored him, dragging the beast ever closer to the ground. Its clawed feet scrabbled on the dirt and rocks, not far from the dead villagers who’d been all but forgotten in the chaos.

Connor stalked closer to the beast, laying his hand on the muzzle. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

The beast’s eyes drooped to the grass beneath it. Its chest heaved up and down, slowing with each breath.

“What is it?” Tressa whispered to no one in particular.

Carrac, the oldest person in the village since Granna’s death, emerged from the village hall with a book in his hand. “It’s a dragon. I remember Sophia telling me stories of them when I was a wee boy on my momma’s knee.” He opened the book, pointing to a colorful drawing, made with dyes they no longer had access to in the village. Another relic from before the fog.

“Dragon?” Connor leaned into the beast. “Is that what you are?”

It didn’t respond, but it didn’t burn Connor into a crisp either.

The dragon opened one eye, pupil slitted like a cat’s and an iris as violet as the setting sun in the dark of winter. Smoke puffed out of the nostril opposite of Connor. Warily, it eyed Bastian, standing next to Tressa, his sword at the ready.

Then it took one big breath and exhaled in one final gush of air.

It no longer moved, lying prostrate on the ground, joining the dead of their village.

Chapter 12

Everyone stood in shock, staring at the dead dragon in the town square. A creature of myth that none of them had ever seen before and few believed was anything more than a figment Sophia's aging imagination.

Connor rubbed the silent creature's muzzle. "Do you need more proof that the outside is knocking on our door? Yet we cannot answer their call. We have no way to defend ourselves."

"What defense is needed against a dead dragon?" Udor countered. "It came here to die, not to fight us. It's chance, nothing more."

Tressa looked around at the gathered crowd. It had swollen after the dragon died. Children crept out of their cottages to get a look at the fabled beast, while still hiding behind their mothers' skirts. Their eyes betrayed their new belief in Connor and Bastian's theory that a world might exist beyond their borders. It wasn't so easy to discount anything as a wild supposition anymore.

"Send them into the fog," one voice from the crowd shouted. The chant began quietly, growing with each repetition.

Connor nodded at Tressa, and took her hand. They stood in front of the crowd, determined. Out of the corner of her eye, Tressa saw Bastian advance toward them. She hoped he would think better of throwing away his life with Vinya and his daughter. Instead he walked right up to Connor's side and clapped his best friend on the shoulder.

"We are prepared to make the sacrifice," Connor said. "Tressa and I were supposed to leave, along with Geoff. But he's fallen ill, so Bastian has volunteered to join us."

A cry rang out from the crowd. Tressa cringed inside, knowing it was Vinya, Bastian's wife. "You will do no such thing. We are bonded and you have responsibilities here." She pushed through the masses, elbowing anyone in her way. "Don't do this. Please." But she wasn't looking at Bastian, Vinya stared at Tressa. The weight of the reality of his choice weighed on her.

Tressa looked over to Bastian, but he stood stone-faced, looking only at Vinya. "This is my decision. If Connor believes our families are in danger, I will stand with him. If I don't go, who will?" Bastian

turned to the crowd. "Who among you will volunteer to risk your lives to save everyone else?"

Eyes turned away from them. Women grasped onto their husband's arms, letting them know they weren't to volunteer. No one else stood up to their mate, choosing to take the risk Connor and Bastian were.

Everyone knew Tressa had nothing to lose.

"I have to go." Bastian turned back to Vinya, his teeth gritted.

"You don't have to do anything," she snarled back at him. She shot a glance at Tressa, huffed, and stomped away. "Make sure you tell your daughter goodbye before you freely walk to your death," she tossed over her shoulder.

Hazel grabbed Vinya's arm, sending the three a look of sympathy. Her understanding was beyond comprehension.

Bastian turned his back on his retreating wife. "When do we leave?"

"We need to gather any supplies we can carry." Connor turned to Tressa. "Did you unpack your bag?"

Tressa shook her head. "No. There wasn't time. I'm ready to go as soon as the two of you are."

"It'll only take me a few minutes," Connor said. "Bastian, go home, get a change of clothes, some food, and whatever else you think we'll need."

Bastian looked over his shoulder. Vinya was gone. "I don't need to. I keep extras of everything at the forge."

Connor looked at him in surprise.

Bastian shrugged his shoulders. "I sleep there sometimes."

Connor laid a hand on Bastian's shoulder. "You should say goodbye to your daughter. I'm going to give my boys big hugs and kisses before I leave."

Bastian mumbled something to Connor, but Tressa couldn't hear. She fought the urge to listen in. If it wasn't for her ears, then she'd have to live without knowing. When they were kids, Connor and Bastian would cook up plots to terrorize her. Spiders in her hair, that sort of thing. One day, she kicked Bastian between the legs, on purpose, and told him that's what he'd get if they ever kept secrets from her again. That was the last time they'd spoken in whispers in front of her. Until today.

Connor nodded. "I understand." He shifted a bit, including Tressa in their conversation. She pretended like she hadn't even noticed they were excluding her. "Bastian and I will be back here before the sun crests."

Tressa looked up into the sky. They didn't have long. "Okay. I'll be back then too. I just need to grab my pack and a couple of other things."

Connor tossed an arm over Tressa and Bastian's shoulders. "The old gang back together. This is going to be some adventure."

Bastian smiled, nodded, and then walked toward the forge. Tressa slipped out from Connor's arm and left for her cottage. She glanced over her shoulder one more time at the dead dragon. Her heart swelled and she knew only one thing: she needed to see another one of those, alive and strong.

Chapter 13

Tressa snuck into her cottage, avoiding the crowds still milling

around outside. They seemed to have lost interest in blaming her. In a way, the dragon saved her from an angry mob. They would have turned on her, all of them, and she knew it. Udor only would have fanned the flames of their ignorance, leading them into thinking she was everything he wanted them to believe.

She reached into the corner of the small cottage, grabbing her travel pack. It was stuffed with a change of clothes, breeches not a dress, bread and apples, a bit of jerky, a jar of honey, and little else. A small doll crafted by Granna from fabric scraps hid in the bottom. It was the one sentimental item she allowed herself. Everything else would have to stay behind. Waiting for her return.

Well, if she'd had family that might be the case. With Granna gone, her goods would likely last a day before they were distributed to others who needed them. No one ever came back, so why bother saving them?

She reached into her pocket, fingering the crinkled note she'd found earlier. She wanted to chalk it up to more of Granna's wishing.

A lilting noise interrupted her reverie. Tressa peeked out the back window, looking for the source. In the apple tree behind her cottage, a small downy bird, with huge eyes and a tiny beak peered at her. Its head bobbed up and down, then flipped to the side. Tressa gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. Nerak, Granna's little owl.

Tressa tsked with her tongue, while stretching out her hand. The owl tilted its head to the other side. It was such a strange movement, as if it could almost turn its head upside down. "I'm glad to see you one last time before I leave."

The owl hooted at her, sticking its neck out and rolling its eyes. Tressa couldn't help but laugh. It was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. Nerak had always been loyal to Granna, treating Tressa as nothing more than an oddity. She'd treated the owl in kind. Now they had something in common – a loss so great neither knew how to go on.

Nerak inched closer and closer until a claw rested on the tip of Tressa's finger.

"Do you want to say goodbye to me?" Tressa smiled. The owl hooted and moved fully onto Tressa's outstretched fingers. Instead of digging in hard, it rested lightly. Warmth spread through Tressa, radiating from her hands to her shoulders, then both up and down her body. She shuddered, drawing her arm back into the cottage. As soon as both her hand and the owl were back in warmth of her home, the bird jumped to Tressa's shoulder. It nuzzled against her hair and pecked playfully at her braid.

A knock at the door startled her.

"Hey, Tressa, you still in there?"

Connor.

"Tressa?"

Bastian.

"You said you didn't need much time. Everything okay?" Connor knocked again.

"I'm here. I'm just, uh, changing clothes. Putting on breeches for the trip." Trip. She was probably changing her breeches just to walk into certain death. "Give me a few more seconds."

Tressa pulled food and clothes out of her bag. Yanking the breeches over her legs one at a time, she cinched the waist under her dress, then pulled it down over the breeches. Sure she looked ridiculous, but not caring much at the moment, Tressa gathered up the little owl in her hands. "If you want to come with me, maybe you should hide in my bag."

There were only a few owls in Hutton's Bridge. They were looked on as a good luck charm. No one would want her to take Nerak with her, but Tressa needed every scrap of luck she could get.

Nerak didn't argue, letting her lower it into her pack. She wrapped the food in one of her clean shirts, then placed it next to Granna's friend. "Don't eat any of that, okay?" She wasn't even sure what an owl would eat. Hopefully not apples or bread or jerky.

She flipped the flap over the top and secured it with a small toggle. The owl didn't protest. She patted the top of the bag. "Okay. You can come in now."

Connor opened the door, Bastian stood behind him with his sword drawn. Tressa raised an eyebrow at their cautious entrance. "Something's not right," Connor said, glancing around her cottage. He raised a hand and Bastian lowered his sword. "We thought maybe you were being held against your will. You are okay, right?"

"Yeah, everything's fine." Tressa tried to appear calm. She worked even harder to keep her eyes from darting to her pack. "When do we leave? Are we getting a proper send off or are they just kicking us out of the village?"

"There are a few gathered," Connor said. "Hazel, my boys, a few of

our neighbors, and some random others.”

Tressa didn't ask Bastian if Vinya would be there and he didn't offer the information.

“Ready? There's no time left to waste. We need to leave, make it through the fog, and find a cure.” Connor ran a hand through his hair, confident. As if leaving was something easy and not a death sentence.

“Don't forget coming back to save the village.” Tressa slipped her pack off the table and onto her shoulder. Nerak didn't protest. A small pressure on her back, like nuzzling, told her the owl was as attached to her as she was to it.

Bastian cracked a small smile at the corner of his mouth. Tressa smiled back, forgetting for a moment that he was no longer her best friend and lover. She knew that smile all too well. A sudden rush of jealousy swept through her, wondering if Vinya had seen it too, or if that was only for her.

Connor opened the door. Bastian walked out first, the smile wiped from his face. Maybe Tressa had only imagined it. He motioned for Tressa to follow him out. They were being overprotective of her, probably concerned someone would still blame her for the plague. Tressa stepped lightly, careful not to jostle her pack with Nerak hiding inside.

The crowd had dwindled. She glanced to the square. The only remaining body was the dragon. The three villagers had already been moved to their final resting place in the fog. Geoff's wife was gone and he wasn't far behind. Their son would make sure someone knew and could care for the bodies the way they deserved. It was unlikely they would be the only ones who would need such help.

A group of ten people stood to the side, off by the fog, near the town square. Tressa recognized all of them. Connor's wife and two children. Three elders. Three villagers Tressa vaguely knew. Udor.

Instinctively, she reached back, touching her pack. Nerak had to be quiet around Udor. She feared what he would do to her if discovered. Through the pack, she felt the peck of the owl's beak. Acknowledgement that it understood? Whatever it was, it would have to do.

“This is it?” Tressa whispered to Connor. Normally the entire village showed up to say goodbye to those walking into the fog. Often, everyone from Hutton's Bridge offered gifts of medicine, jerky, honey, or anything they could spare. “Their gifts won't be enough.”

“It's never enough,” Connor returned. “No one's come back, no matter how much they've received.”

“You'll received nothing today,” Udor told them. “No one is willing to help you. We're only here to make sure you leave. Death awaits you whether you stay or go, Tressa. Connor and Bastian, I ask you to

reconsider.”

“No.” Hazel stepped forward, her hand on the shoulder of her toddler, another baby in her crooked arm. “I will give what I can.”

Connor enveloped his family in his arms. “You’ll do no such thing. Save it for yourself and the children.” He glanced around the village. “You don’t know when you’ll need it.”

“He’s right, Hazel. Take care of yourself and your children, just like we’ll do for ourselves out there.” Bastian set a strong hand on her shoulder. The look in his eyes was grim, but Tressa noticed he didn’t look around for his own wife and daughter. Her heart fell as she realized he must have assumed they wouldn’t show. Coupling didn’t always produce a loving life bond, but she couldn’t believe Vinya wouldn’t even come to see him off.

Tressa nodded, mute. There was no one there who loved her. She and Bastian didn’t have the caring words Connor was getting whispered in his ear. She kept her eyes away from Udor, not wanting to give him one moment of her precious time. There wasn’t much left. Instead, she chose to focus on Bastian’s back. If she couldn’t tell him how much she loved him before they walked through the fog to their deaths, she could at least spend her last moments memorizing every inch of him.

Connor broke away from Hazel. He made eye contact with Bastian, then with Tressa. “Ready?” Always the gentleman. Always giving them a way out.

“Of course.” Tressa shifted from one leg to the other, surprised how heavy the little owl was on her back. Nerak couldn’t have weighed more than a few pounds. Or maybe it was the weight of knowing she was about to face the unknown. A shiver raced through her body, ending in a cold sweat on her brow.

Bastian sheathed the sword he’d been carrying at his side. He looked over at the fog, then at Tressa. He opened his mouth, but then closed it before he could utter a word. Tressa yearned to tell him to say something, anything, but held back. They’d said everything they needed to say to each other, two years ago, on the first night of their coupling. She knew she hadn’t changed her feelings and by the look in his green eyes, he hadn’t either.

Udor’s laugh scratched at her ears. “What are you waiting for? Afraid? Don’t be. Just step in.” He shooed them with his hands.

Connor’s toddler reared back, kicking Udor on the shin. “Don’t talk to my poppa that way. Shut up you mean old man.”

Hazel held back a snicker behind the baby’s head. “Why don’t you leave, now? Let them go in peace.”

Udor sneered, turning on his heel he stalked away, followed by three villagers. Only Hazel, her kids, and the elders remained. One of

the older women stepped forward, placing a hand on Tressa's shoulder.

She smoothed Tressa's hair with her veined hand. "Sophia was an inspiration to me. I have gifts for you."

"No. I have everything I need," she responded. Tressa leaned over, kissing the woman on her leathery cheek. "Thank you, though."

The old woman nodded, then with the help of the other two elders, walked away in silence. Tressa glanced at Hazel and her two boys. "It's probably time for you to go as well."

"No. My children will see their father leave as a hero. The baby won't remember, but he will be told the stories to come in the future. He will know he was there, even if his memory doesn't assure him. His brother will remember, though. I will make sure of that." Hazel leaned over, kissing Connor one last time on the cheek. "Go now. Know how much we love you. All of you."

Tressa's head snapped up at that. She glanced at Bastian. Had Hazel said that only to soothe Bastian's sadness at the absence of his family?

"Don't be so surprised, Tressa." Hazel laughed. "I knew the three of you were a package deal. I accepted that the first day with Connor."

Tressa reached over, and squeezed Hazel's arm. If she didn't have a stowaway hidden in her pack, she might have hugged her. "You're a strong woman."

"I have to be to be married to him." Hazel nodded at her husband. "Now, off with you. Do what you've come here to do. This is the least attended leaving ever, but you will be successful. I feel it in my bones."

Tressa wished fervently she had some sight into the future, like Granna always claimed to have, giving her any reason to calm her pounding heart. Anything to tamp down the fear slowly rising from her toes into her chest.

Connor took Tressa's hand, softly cradling it in his own. He nodded to Bastian, who took Tressa's other hand. Instead of holding it palm to palm like Connor, Bastian laced his fingers with Tressa's and squeezed. She looked up at him, forgetting for just a moment they were about to take three steps into the unknown. Into what was probably the end of their entire existence.

"On three," Connor said.

"One."

Tressa held her breath.

"Two."

She let it out.

"Three."

She lifted her foot in unison with Connor and Bastian, stepping

into the unknown.

Chapter 14

The damp fog crept up her body, starting with the first nibble on her shoes, slowly consuming her body. Tressa's eyes were shut, hiding her from death's grasp. Her breath caught in her chest.

She couldn't hold it in any longer. The air slipped out her nose and her chest screamed for more. Tressa's mouth fell open, taking in a misty breath that whispered in her soul. Alive. She was alive.

"Bastian? Connor?"

A squeeze to her hands told her they were alive too. Her whole body perked awake, rising from the dream of death. Finality no longer seemed something to fear.

"We're alive. We're alive!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"She's right." Connor's whoop of joy echoed around her. "But I can't see either of you."

"I can't see you either, Connor. Don't let go of my hand. Hold on tight. Bastian, are you okay? Say something?"

Silence surrounded them. She swallowed the bile climbing up her throat. Not Bastian. No. He had to be alive. She could still feel his hand in hers.

"Bastian?"

"Holy mother -"

Tressa burst out in laughter, cutting off his expletive. "You half-wit. I thought you were dead."

"What? You don't like holding hands with dead guys?" he asked her, joking. It had been a long time since Bastian had teased her like that. It almost felt like old times. Almost.

"Can anyone else hear us?" Tressa shouted again. They'd only taken a step. Hazel wasn't far away. It would give her comfort to know they were safe. Bastian and Connor shouted the names of Connor's children, but there was no response.

"Let's move ahead," Connor finally said.

"Can you see anything?" Tressa asked.

"Not unless you count dark mist right in front of my eyeballs," Bastian said. Tressa imagined him squinting, trying to see more just like she was.

“So now what?” Connor asked. “Do you think this is always what happens? Step into the fog and wander forever in blindness until you die?”

Tressa shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s keep walking.” Bastian tugged on Tressa’s hand and she yanked on Connor’s.

“Don’t let go,” she said to both of them. Placing one foot in front of the other, she staggered behind Bastian’s gentle pull. But Connor’s fingers started to slip out of hers. She squeezed, trying to get a good grip on him. “Connor! Don’t!”

“I can’t. It hurts. I can’t move any further.” His voice came out strangled, as if he couldn’t get enough air to finish his thought.

Tressa tugged hard on Bastian. “Don’t move,” she commanded him, but he continued to tug her forward.

“Something’s pushing me forward and I can’t stop.” His fingers started to slip out of hers too.

Tears streamed down Tressa’s cheeks. They couldn’t step into the fog, experience the euphoria of still being alive, only to have some unseen force tear them apart. A poking at her back reminded her of her hidden guest. Its talons clawed inside the bag, shredding Tressa’s back into fleshy strips as it struggled to get free.

The pain was too much to bear. Tressa let go of both Bastian and Connor, blindly reaching behind her to unhook the toggle holding the bag shut. If she didn’t, Nerak would claw her to a bloody pulp.

With a beating of wings behind her head, the owl flew free of the bag. Tressa fell to the ground, weak, alone, and afraid. “Bastian? Connor?” She cried out for both of them, but heard nothing in return. They were lost to her. Was this how it was to be, then? How long would she last alone? How long until the fog claimed her, taking her last breath from her chest?

She called out once more for Bastian and Connor, but was only greeted by the oppressive silence of the fog. Maybe she was already dead, lost to the ether in a blanket of blindness and solitude.

A small beak nipped at her back, then the weight of the owl pushed down on her shoulder. So she wasn’t alone. Tressa reached up, ruffling Nerak’s feathers. If nothing else, she believed death hadn’t claimed her. Yet.

“What can we do now?” she asked it. The owl responded with a hoot. Warmth spread, a power unlike any she’d experienced permeated her whole body. A faint purple glow bathed the ground in front of her, illuminating her surroundings for the first time.

Trees stood firmly, asserting their claim on the forest no one had successfully traversed in almost eighty years. Dense fog wrapped its tendrils around emaciated tree branches reaching out to each other in

a silent cry for help. Eerily silent, the forest was devoid of all life. Tressa shivered, more afraid now than before.

She rose to her feet, stretching out her full height, still feeling dwarfed by the trees. "What can I do with this?" She still not sure exactly what she was experiencing.

Find. Love. Use. Magic.

Tressa started and looked around. There was no one but her and the owl on her shoulder. "Was that you?"

The owl tilted its head. *Nerak. Good owl. Love.* The owl bobbed its head up and down, nuzzling its beak into Tressa's neck.

"Granna told me stories about communicating with animals, but I never believed it. No one in my village could do it. We thought it was one of those stories that gets bigger with time."

Find. Love. Use. Magic.

"I don't know how," Tressa said.

Silence. Breathe.

Tressa closed her eyes, her eyelashes fluttering against her upper cheeks. She took in a deep breath, then released it slowly through her mouth. As the air passed over her lips, she felt calm float through her body. The magic took over forcing Tressa's eyes open again and casting a purple haze over the whole area.

"Bastian!" she cried out.

"Tressa!" His voice was so far away.

"Bastian! Are you out there? Can you see the light?" She stumbled to her feet, still holding onto the owl with a hand.

"Yes!" he called back. "Connor? Can you see the purple glow?"

Tressa strained for an answer, any indication her friend was still alive and close by. But he didn't respond. "Bastian! Try to get to me. Follow the light. Maybe we can find Connor together."

"Don't move, Tressa. I'm coming!"

She fidgeted. "Are you making that light?" she asked her owl. It bobbed around on her shoulder. She took that as a yes. "I'm not going to hide you anymore, okay? It looks like you may have saved us."

She hoped, deep in her soul, that Connor was still out there. After a few tense minutes, Bastian's outline took shape in the fog. Tressa reached out her hands. He grasped them tightly in his. When he tried to yank her into an embrace, she held back. Not with the owl on her shoulder. Maybe not at all.

"Tressa?" Bastian asked. He was still a shadow in the fog, even though she could feel his fingertips on her arm. "How are you doing that?"

So he could see the owl. "It sits there on its own. I'm not doing anything."

"Owl? What are you talking about? I mean the light."

Tressa laughed. "The light isn't me. It's the owl. Somehow she's projecting it, helping us to see each other in this mess."

She could make out the shadow of Bastian's head shaking. "No, Tressa. The light is coming from you. From your eyes."

"What?" She mustn't have heard him right. "Not mine. The owl."

"No, Tressa, it's coming from your eyes. Not an owl." He paused. "What owl?"

"You can't see it? It's sitting on my shoulder." Tressa pointed with her finger, then realized that was ridiculous. Even Bastian was just a shadow in the fog. Of course he couldn't see the tiny bird sitting on her shoulder. Even so, the glow had to be coming from the owl, not her own eyes. She craned her neck toward her shoulder. The purple glow was there, surrounding the little owl. She squinted, trying to narrow down the source of the glow to the owl's eyes.

But as her field of vision narrowed, she could see the owl's face more clearly. The glow surrounded Nerak, but wasn't coming from it. The owl tilted its head, looking back at Tressa. She glanced back toward Bastian, noticing for the first time the glow followed her eyes wherever they lead.

"Bastian?" she called out. "Are you still there?"

His shadow became more apparent as he moved closer. "I'm here."

"I think you're right. The glow is coming from me." She faltered, feeling like an idiot. "But I don't know why, or how."

"Who cares? It saved us and that's all that matters. Whatever it is you're doing, it brought us back together." His arm slid around her waist, pulling her close.

Their chests touched, leaving no more than a breath between them. A slight pinch to her shoulder told her the owl was taking flight. The glow extinguished and Bastian pulled her closer. Not out of desire, but concern.

"I can't see you anymore. Can you see me?" His voice was lined with worry as his arm tightened its grip on her waist.

"No." Tressa shook her head, feeling Bastian's hard chest against her cheek. He was so close, but even with her eyes wide open, she couldn't see one inch of him. The fog was too thick, enveloping her sense of sight. Without the glow, there was nothing.

"It's okay as long as we're together." Bastian rested his chin on the top of Tressa's head. "Is the owl still on your shoulder? I don't feel it." His hand ran up and down her arm.

"No. It flew away when you pulled me closer." She wanted to tell him she didn't regret it because being in his arms was the only thing she'd ever craved.

"Call it back." His breath lingered on her cheek. If she stood on her tiptoes, she knew their lips would be even.

“Here, Nerak!” She closed her eyes, remembering how she’d gotten the owl to come to her in the first place. “I’m going to let go of you, but just with one hand. Make sure you hang on to me, okay?” she asked Bastian.

His grip tightened more. Tressa held her arm out to the side and attempted to mimic the hooting noise Nerak made. A flapping sound cut through the fog. Hope surged in Tressa’s chest, confirmed only when she felt the familiar pinch of talons on her hand.

“I did it. She’s back.” Tressa bent her arm, bringing her hand closer to her body. The feathers brushed against her nose.

“The light’s not back,” Bastian said. “We need that to find Connor.”

“Well, she was on my shoulder the last time it happened. Maybe I should try that?” Tressa touched her hand to her shoulder and wiggled her fingers. The little owl’s talons shimmied from Tressa’s hand to her shoulder. The purple glow came back.

“I think you’ve got a magic owl there. Let’s see if we can use this light to find Connor.” Bastian kept one arm snaked around her waist. They stood side-by-side, hips touching. “Which way should we go first?”

A blood-curdling scream ripped through the air. Connor.

“This way,” Tressa said, heading off in the direction of the cry.

Chapter 15

They wandered through the mist, stumbling over their own feet. The light only gave shape to shadows in the darkness. Bastian held his sword out in front of them as a guide to keep them from running into trees. The screams had stopped as quickly as they'd come on, yet they pressed forward in the direction they'd believed to be right. Bastian was always sure of himself – except not now. The fog disoriented him more than he'd like to admit. For Tressa's sake, he kept his mouth shut.

A splash was followed by a squeal. Tressa pushed back into Bastian, stopping him before he got wet.

"I think it's a pond," Tressa said. "Or maybe a stream. I can kind of see where it ends. Can you?"

Bastian squinted. The purple haze helped, but it wasn't as illuminating as daylight. "I think you're right." He took a step in front of Tressa, his hand still on her waist. "Hold on. What's that?" Bastian bent over, picking something up from the ground.

He turned it to the side. Hard edges crusted over with a dark powdery substance. He ran his fingers along the object. Leathery, bumpy, and slightly damp.

"What is it?" Tressa strained to see the object. "Bastian?" She touched his shoulder.

Apprehension bubbled up in his gut, churning like a volcano before an explosion as he ran his fingers over it. A hard surface, about the size of a bean, sat at the end of each of the five sticks.

He tossed the object into the river.

"What was it?"

Bastian turned to her. He could feel his face reddening and was glad the light was too dim for Tressa to see him. His cheeks puffing with uneven, deep breaths. "A hand."

Tressa stumbled a step, but Bastian's tight grip pulled her back to him.

He clasped her chin between his fingers, forcing her to look at him. "It wasn't Connor."

She shook her head free. "How do you know? Are you sure?"

A grim smile passed over his face. "I know Connor like he was my own brother. It was not his hand. I stake my life on it." He gazed out over the little river, playing hide-and-seek with the fog. "But I don't know whose it is or why it was along this riverbank. It was chewed at the wrist. I don't know what broke the bone from the arm."

"On our side of the bank," Tressa said in a whisper. "Please tell me there wasn't any blood. That it wasn't, um, newly bitten."

Bastian's lips pressed together. "It wasn't. We should keep moving." He poked his sword into the water, measuring the depth. "It's not deep. Let's go."

"Hold on. We can't cross this while still holding on to each other. It won't work. Let me make a rope." Tressa grabbed a few vines hanging over the riverbank. She wove them into a quick braid.

Bastian tied one end around Tressa's waist and the other around his.

"Let's go. I don't want to stay in one place too long." He took one more glance around them, pausing a moment as he looked over Tressa's shoulder.

"What? Do you see something?" Her voice was tinged with fear.

"I can't see anything. I just don't trust it." Bastian stepped into the water, first one careful foot than another. He motioned for Tressa to follow him.

The water was cold, almost icy, enveloping his feet with a numbing wetness. Bastian tried to ignore it. The water slowly crept up his ankle to mid-calf. His breeches clung to his legs.

Within a few minutes, the water began to recede down his leg. Bastian stepped out of the stream. He held out a hand to help Tressa out, but she didn't take it, or pretended not to notice it, as she emerged from the water.

"Now what?" she asked, bending over and wringing out the bottom of her breeches. "Should we try calling out for Connor again?"

A rustling in the trees broke their conversation. Bastian held a hand up, and then put his finger to his lips. Tressa nodded. He waved his hand in front of her eyes, pointing frantically at the owl. Tressa covered Nerak's eyes, still not sure exactly how to control the power the owl was lending her. She shrugged a few times. Maybe if they were no longer touching, the magic wouldn't flow through her anymore.

Nerak complied, hopping off her shoulder, snuggling back into her pack again.

The light extinguished and mist surrounded them. Bastian reached down for the vine. With a sigh of relief, he realized it was still attached. They wouldn't lose each other again.

Bastian sunk down to the ground next to her, his arm circling her

shoulders. His lips tickled her earlobe as he leaned in and whispered, "Something's out there. I don't know what. Maybe if we're quiet, it won't notice us in the fog."

"Unless it can see through it, while we can't," Tressa whispered back in his ear, careful not to touch him with her lips. Bastian's arm only held her tighter in response.

They sat still, hidden in the fog, their whispered breaths the only noise other than a faint sniffing sound. Tressa scooted closer to Bastian.

Another crack. Then another. Another. All going away from them, getting quieter and farther away with each broken branch and cracked leaf.

"Bring out the owl," Bastian said. "We need to keep moving. If Connor hasn't changed direction, we need to go the opposite way of whatever that was."

"It's okay to come out now. Are you afraid too? It's alright. It's gone," Tressa said to Nerak.

Bastian heard the flapping of wings as the owl hopped up on Tressa's shoulder. The world came alive again, bathed in that same unearthly purple haze.

"We have to find Connor before that thing does," Tressa said. She stood up next to Bastian. His sword was drawn, at the ready.

"Then let's go," he said. They both tried to ignore the size of the footprints left by the beast. The indentations were large enough for the two of them to stand in together.

Chapter 16

After hours of searching, Tressa sat down on an old tree trunk. Its roots held it firmly in the ground even though the rest of it had died and fallen countless years ago. She rubbed her calves, trying to massage out the kinks after the hard day's trek. Bastian sat on the ground next to her. He pulled off a boot and shook it over the ground. Pebbles and sticks tumbled out.

"We can't just keep wandering forever," Tressa said. They hadn't found any sign of Connor. No more broken branches on the ground and the screams had stopped hours ago. "We need a plan."

Bastian pulled a whetstone from his pack and ran it along his sword, sharpening it after a long day of using it to cut branches and vines. "Any suggestions?"

Tressa pursed her lips together. She didn't have any idea what to do or where to go. "We can't leave Connor behind. I mean, our goal is to get out of the village alive, find some kind of cure for the plague, and go back and help them. But Connor is our best friend."

"And he's the one who believed in us most. He knew we'd find a way to succeed. He wouldn't want us to waste any time, especially if it means getting back sooner. He was so worried about Hazel and the boys getting sick." Bastian sat back against a rock, sheathing his sword. He rested his hands on his knees and closed his eyes. "I don't know what to do."

"Connor would want us to go on without him. Find a way out." Tressa said it in a whisper. The truth wasn't something she wanted to admit out loud, but it had to be said. She could imagine Connor telling them just that. "But at the same time, he'd never leave one of us behind."

"And that's why we won't stop looking for him." Bastian stared into her eyes.

The purple haze must have been disconcerting. Tressa could only imagine how she looked - possessed, unnatural.

"I'm glad we agree." Relieved, she relaxed a little. The last thing she wanted was to leave Connor behind, but making the decision to put the village at risk while they searched for their friend wasn't an

easy one. She and Bastian needed to agree on this and they both knew it. "But how do we find him?"

Bastian pointed at Nerak. "Can she see in the dark like you?"

Tressa looked at the little owl, sleeping soundly on her shoulder. She stroked the feathers, waking her up gently. Her tiny eyelids flipped open and Nerak cocked her head to the side. "Can you help us find our friend Connor? Can you fly through the fog and help us figure out which way to go?"

Scared.

She buried her head in Tressa's shoulder, turning her head to peek at Bastian.

"Please, will you help us?" he asked.

Tressa's eyes grew wide. "Can you hear her too?"

Bastian face scrunched up. "Hear her? No, she's obviously afraid. I can tell by her body language. Can you communicate with her somehow?"

Tressa nodded. It might be odd, but it was the only chance they had. "I can hear words in my mind. Just pieces of thoughts, but she's definitely worried." She stroked Nerak's head, scratching her lightly with dirty fingernails. Tressa could only imagine what the rest of her body looked like based on the filth she'd managed to pick up. Bastian looked the same as he always did - a little messy, sweaty, and tired.

"Hey you," Bastian tapped Nerak lightly on the head. "We need your help to find our friend. The sooner we get him, the sooner we get out of this foggy mess. All I need you to do is fly around a bit. Use your little purple glow to guide yourself."

"How will she find us again?" Tressa asked, worried. She knew it was a good plan, but she didn't want Nerak giving up her life for them either. If she got lost, or never found her way back, Tressa wouldn't forgive herself. It felt like sending a child out to do an adult's job. "Could you fly away and come back to us?"

Nerak tilted her head to the other side. *See. Fly. Find.* And after a pause, *Afraid.*

"I know," Tressa cooed, "we're afraid too. You don't have to do this. It's not your battle."

The owl's eyes snapped open even wider, taking up the bulk of her snowy face. *War. Coming. Save.*

Her wings flitted out and Nerak took off in flight, leaving Tressa and Bastian hidden in the fog again. Tressa ran her hands around her waist, looking for the vine that connected her and Bastian. Hand over hand, she inched closer to him, not wanting to feel so alone in the enveloping mist. Her hand touched his waist and she left it there for only a moment until she slipped her hand into his.

"She'll come back, won't she?" Uncertainty laced Bastian's words.

Tressa smiled a little, knowing he wouldn't be able to see her. A man of action was giving over control to a tiny bird he'd just met. If the situation weren't so dire, Tressa would have laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of it all. "I want to believe she will." She held back the words Nerak had whispered in her mind. War. As if they didn't have enough problems already.

"We should try to get some sleep while she's gone. In this damn fog I can't even tell what time of day it is." He scooted a little closer to her, shoving a piece of fabric in her hand. "It's my extra shirt. You can put it under your head so it's not on the ground."

Tressa held it up to her nose, inhaling Bastian's scent. Memories flooded her mind and her body, reminding her of the short time they'd had together. She didn't think he knew, but on their last day together, she'd stolen one of his shirts and kept it hidden in her cottage. She never washed it and on days when she would need consoling, she would hold it to her face and remember what it felt like to be his. To be safe. To be loved.

Tressa shoved it back at him, unable to let those memories overwhelm her. "I brought my own stuff. It's okay. You use it." She slipped her hand into her pack, pulling out a wadded up cloak. It worked just as well as a blanket, with the hood serving as a pillow.

Tressa lay down on the ground, wrapping the scratchy wool around her body and plumping up the hood for a makeshift pillow. She stretched out, flexing her toes to give her calves a little stretch before falling asleep. They'd done a lot of walking, far more than she was used to, and she didn't want to wake up sore.

Bastian lay next to her, not touching, but she could feel and hear him breathing. The vine connecting them gave them feet of slack, but he didn't move away from her.

Tressa was glad. She wanted him close. The fog was too disconcerting, too frightening, and she wanted to wake up with Bastian within arm's reach. Exhaustion overtook her fast, sending her off into a sleep filled with nightmares.

Chapter 17

*A*waken. Find. Hurry.

Tressa's eyes snapped open. The world came aglow in a violet haze as Nerak sat on her shoulder. She reached out for Bastian, and was surprised to find he was holding her hand, their fingers laced together. She slipped hers out before shaking him lightly on the shoulder.

"Bastian, wake up. Nerak found Connor."

He sprang to his feet, as if he'd been ready for an attack, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Pack up. Let's get moving."

Nerak bobbed her head in agreement.

Wiggling out of her cloak, Tressa got all of her things together, shoved them in her pack, and stood up. "Is he close?"

Nerak bobbed her head again.

"Have we been asleep long?" she asked the little owl.

Nerak's head spun around, until her eyes were upside down.

"I'm not sure she understands that question," Bastian said, laughing. "It's impossible to know without any sun. Are you sure you feel rested enough to move on?"

Tressa stretched her legs, jumping lightly on her toes. A small cramp stabbed her calf, but she ignored it. "I'm fine. It's most important to find Connor. The faster we go, the faster we're all reunited. Can you show us the way?" she asked Nerak.

The owl bobbed her head, then flew off Tressa's shoulder. "Can you see her? I can't." She ran her hands through her hair. "Nerak!"

A familiar scratch gnawed at her shoulder, then the glow returned. "How will we do this?" She wasn't sure if she was asking the owl or Bastian.

Feel. Follow. Find.

Nerak poked her in the shoulder with her left claw, waited a few seconds then poked again.

Tressa turned to the left. "Is this what you're saying?"

Feel. Follow. Find.

So she did. For a countless time, she followed every nudge of Nerak's claw into her shoulder until she heard a light moaning ahead.

"Connor!" Tressa shouted. He lay on the ground, covered in leaves

and branches, but his sandy hair stood out in the hazy glow of her magic. She ran to him, refusing to be quiet, not caring that they were probably being hunted. All that mattered was they'd found Connor thanks to Nerak.

She slid down on the ground, landing in the muddy leaves next to him. Tressa brushed his hair back from his forehead. Cool, which meant he wasn't ill and didn't have the plague. His chest moved softly, but slowly, up and down in measured breaths. "He's alive," she whispered over her shoulder to Bastian.

He sank down next to her, pushing leaves and sticks off of Connor. "Come on, buddy. We have to get you out of here."

Tressa grabbed Bastian's chin, forcing him to face her. "Where are we going to take him? It's not like we have a safe place to hide."

"Your owl's going to get us out of here, just like she led us to Connor." He pointed at Nerak.

"Do you know the way out?" Tressa asked her.

Nerak bobbed her head.

Close. Death. End.

"She says it's close," Tressa said, not looking Bastian in the eye. Even if death awaited them, it was better than living in fear in the fog. Any human enemy had to be better than the one she couldn't see out here in the forest. She turned back to Connor. "He's not waking up. But he's alive. Can you carry him?"

Bastian nodded, scooping Connor up in his arms. His legs dangled in the air, and his head cradled on Bastian's shoulder like a baby. The loamy scent of moss lingered around him.

"Let's go," Bastian said, his voice hard. "Tell your owl to get us out of here."

"Ready, Nerak?" Tressa asked her. The little owl quaked, sending a light vibration down to Tressa's shoulder.

Death. War. Blood.

"Okay, let's go." She ruffled Nerak's feathers to let her know she cared, but they couldn't stop now. Staying in the fog wasn't an option. The only way out was through.

Nerak paused for a few moments, then squeezed Tressa's shoulder with her right talon.

"To the right," Tressa told Bastian. He was already sweating with the exertion of carrying his best friend. Bastian's muscles bulged, straining against Connor's limp body.

"Who knew he was so heavy?" Bastian asked, a slight smile on his face. "I'll have to make sure he stays away from cakes for a while after he's better."

Tressa glanced at Bastian, knowing he was only trying to defuse the situation. There was too much at stake. An unknown monster

behind them. An unknown world ahead of them. Connor's safety and health was their first priority.

They advanced on a tangled copse of trees so dense Tressa couldn't make out anything on the other side. Nerak squeezed her shoulder with both talons, indicating they should stop.

Tressa halted and Bastian slowed behind her. She held up one arm and whispered to Nerak, "Is the end of the fog on the other side?"

Nerak bobbed her head and rolled her eyes. The owl quaked, even the little feathers on the side of her head vibrated in the air with the ferocity of a bumblebee's wings.

Death. Death. Death.

Bastian's eyes sought out Tressa's. "Should I put him down? Carve a path through the branches to get us out of this nightmare?"

Tressa nodded. "Yeah, I'll take care of him."

Bastian laid Connor on the grass next to Tressa. She knelt down and took his hand in hers. "We're almost out of here," she whispered. "We'll find out where the plague came from, get a cure, and go back and save Hazel and your boys. I promise."

A small groan escaped his lips and a word that sounded something like Hazel. Tressa smoothed his hair and leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Still cool. Even though he hadn't shown any signs of the plague, she was cautious, concerned the fever just hadn't spiked yet.

She looked up. Bastian was partway through the trees, his sword gleaming as he hacked away at the dead branches that sewed them into the mist. "Can you see?" She called out to him.

Bastian turned, nodded, then quickly went back to work, as if possessed. He didn't falter, didn't stop to rest, just swung and stabbed until a path formed in front of him. A ray of light burst through the trees. Tressa threw an arm over her eyes.

She stumbled to her feet and reached out a hand toward the yellow light streaming through the hole Bastian had created. With both hands, she carefully removed Nerak from her shoulder, letting the little owl fly above her. The purple haze disappeared, but the streaks of sunlight penetrated the fog, slicing it to bits and pieces with each stroke of Bastian's sword. More and more streaks ripped through the air, obliterating the prison that held them.

"Connor, we made it!" She dropped down to the ground next to him. His chest rose and contracted slowly, still proving he was alive. But the catch each time he began to inhale told her he didn't have much time left.

"Hazel called me. In the fog..." Connor's voice trailed off. His eyelids remained closed. He lay as still as a leaf on a day with no wind.

"Bastian!" She called out.

He turned toward Tressa, raising his hand in the air and waving it back and forth. Then he went back to work.

The sunlight grew brighter. It crept over the dead trees and through the path Bastian hacked free. He sheathed his sword and stalked back to Tressa and Connor. Scooping Connor in his arms, Bastian and Tressa made their way to the edge of the forest.

Freedom.

At least she thought it was until she saw what waited for them on the other side.

Chapter 18

Rows of soldiers stood in front of Tressa. Twelve in all black, the rest in armor. Their eyes glared from within narrowed lids. Noses flared as they took the same measured breaths, their chests rising and falling in unison.

The woman in front took three steps forward. A ponytail swung from side to side, the ends brushing against the ground. Braided, her hair was as thick as Bastian's leg, but far more dangerous. Sunlight bounced off the spikes and metal shards woven into her dark brown braid. Her lips curled at the side in a smirk.

"We've been waiting for you. Come with us." She motioned with two fingers.

Tressa didn't want to follow the strange woman, but Connor needed a healer. She glanced at Bastian. "Should we?"

He didn't take his eyes off of the braided woman. "Do we have a choice?"

"No, you don't." The woman sashayed closer, her hips swaying.

She was dizzyingly intoxicating. Tressa swallowed hard, resting her hand on Bastian's lower back to steady herself.

"You don't want to anger me. It would be a most unwise decision." Her fingertip trailed across Connor's forehead. A frown replaced the smirk. "He does not have long. If you don't come with us, he will die."

Bastian shifted Connor gently in his arms. "Then we'll follow."

Tressa put her hand on his arm. "Are you sure?"

"What other choice do we have?" he whispered.

She glanced at the forest, their town lost again in the deep fog. Nerak had flown away with the breaking of the wall of branches. Tressa didn't know where else to turn.

"You're right. But as soon as Connor's healed, we need to leave."

"And go where?" Bastian asked.

Tressa bit her lip. He didn't know and now wasn't the time to tell him. Not with the woman standing so close, eavesdropping on their every word. "Nowhere. I don't know."

The woman looked Tressa up and down. Tressa stood firm, tightening her core, attempting to look more powerful than she felt.

“Lead the way.”

The woman pivoted, her braid flying out and nicking the hem of Tressa’s breeches. A sliver of fabric fell off in a clean line, floating to the ground

“Stay back a few paces if you don’t want to lose more than that.” She winked at Bastian, leaving her eyelid closed a second longer than was necessary. “I’m Stacia.” She swept an arm out to the side. “This is the battalion under my command. My elite Black Guard, the most feared soldiers in the five kingdoms.”

With a sharp snap of her fingers, the soldiers faced her. “We obey!”

Tressa raised an eyebrow and nudged Bastian. He shot her a severe look, then focused again on Stacia. “If you can help us find a healer for Connor, we will be grateful.”

Stacia smiled, her teeth glinting in the bright sunlight. She reached out a finger, running it along Bastian’s jaw. “I know just how you will repay me.”

Anger welled in Tressa’s chest. She didn’t have a claim over Bastian. In fact, it was still her intention to get him home to his wife and daughter. But watching Stacia feed on him, even if it was only with her eyes, was too much.

Stacia turned her back on them, motioning to her army. They stepped off in formation, marching away from Tressa and Bastian. Stacia didn’t look back at them, only marched beside her warriors.

Bastian leaned over and whispered in Tressa’s ear. “We have to play along if we want to save Connor.”

“How far are you planning on taking it?”

“As far as I have to. Connor’s life is all that matters now.”

She forced herself to face reality. She’d lost Bastian years ago. There would be no going back to what they once had. If he had to give in to another woman to save Connor, then Tressa would have to deal with it the same way she’d coped with Bastian’s marriage to Vinya.

With a heavy heart, she followed Bastian. They’d come too far. They’d escaped the fog that held them. There was nowhere left to go but forward.

Trees towered above them, so tall the world seemed to spin when she looked up at their heights. Dappled sunlight filtered down to them, giving light to the path they walked.

The base of a tree opened up, wider than five men and taller than two stacked Bastians. The army marched through uninterested in the landscape. Tressa paused to marvel at the heartwood inside the bark-covered tunnel. Darkness overtook her, but a light at the other end quickly reminded Tressa she had nothing to fear. At least not from the trees.

Emerging on the other side of the hollow was like entering a new world. Buildings and cottages built into the side of the giant trees cluttered the landscape. A tall building, the tallest of them all, stood in the distance, reaching up into the highest of the treetops. It was a castle. Tressa knew that from Granna's stories. Perhaps there was a king and a queen. Maybe they would offer help to Tressa and Bastian.

Townspeople bustled, going about their activities as if the soldiers marching in pairs with three strangers was an everyday occurrence.

"Excuse me." Tressa touched the sleeve of a passing woman. "What is the name of this town?"

The woman's eyebrows furrowed. "It's the Blue."

"The Blue?" Tressa asked. "That's the name?"

"Where are you from?" The woman looked at Tressa's filthy clothes and then glanced at Connor, still knocked out, in Bastian's arms. "Who are you?"

"Come along!" The woman yelled from the front of the procession. "No talking!"

Tressa dipped her head and followed the army into the world she'd never really believed existed.

Chapter 19

The dancer's hips flowed from side to side, lulling the drunken men into a trance. Bastian sat with Tressa, forcing his gaze from the woman's legs. Tressa's eyes were cast toward the rough-hewn table, her mead untouched.

Bastian looked at Tressa again out of the corner of his eye. He'd considered risking death more than once just to be with her again.

Tressa's lashes flitted up, her eyes meeting his. "Are you thinking about Connor too?"

Bastian took a swig of mead. "Yeah," he lied. "I wish they would have let us stay with Connor in the infirmary. Who knows what they're doing to him."

"Saving him, I hope." Tressa traced a knot on the table with her fingertip. "After he's well, what do you think that woman wants from you?" Tressa stared at his forehead.

Typical. Since they'd been uncoupled, Tressa hadn't been able to ask him anything important without burning a hole in his forehead. She'd distanced herself physically and emotionally from him. It hurt him every time, but he couldn't tell her that.

Bastian shrugged.

"Don't act like you don't know." Now Tressa was staring at his hands.

"I'm not going to assume anything and neither should you." Bastian took another drink.

"Why do you suppose she was waiting for us? Do you think others from our village have made it out here and never come back?"

"I have no idea." Bastian glanced at the dancer. She'd discarded a few more articles of clothing since the last time he'd looked. With Tressa sitting across the table, he felt nothing but embarrassment. "We won't get any answers by sitting here. Let's go." He tossed a couple of coins on the table. The physic said he'd been instructed to give them money and that they were to occupy themselves while Connor was examined. Bastian wasn't sure if it was too much, but it looked similar to what others were leaving at their tables.

Bastian reached out for Tressa's hand, stopping just short of her

fingertips. The closeness he'd felt earlier dissipated after they'd stepped out of the fog. He wanted it back, but the walls had been rebuilt.

They were alive. There was a chance he'd get back to his wife and daughter. Reality resurrected the wedge they'd discarded in the fog. Not just for Tressa, but for Bastian too. He'd spent years perfecting the distance between them.

Tressa grabbed her bag. "Do you think Nerak will find us again?"

The owl. Weirdest damn bird he'd ever encountered. He looked around the bar. Probably wouldn't be the last strange thing he'd find outside of Hutton's Bridge. "Don't know. Maybe she was lost and is back with her family now that we're out of the fog."

"Speaking of family," Tressa began. "I know you're anxious to get back to Vinya and Farah. I'll do everything I can to make that happen for you."

He pursed his lips together. He knew what the right answer was, but he couldn't bring himself to thank her. Missing Farah was a given. Seeing Vinya again wasn't something he was sure he wanted.

"Let's get Connor healthy enough to travel. We can ask the physic for medicine. Everything else comes later." Bastian led the way out of the tavern into the bustling street. He felt Tressa stand a bit closer to him, but not close enough to touch. Her warm breath floated across his upper arm, quick and uneven. She was nervous too. Not surprising. Her incessant need to prove her independence concealed a delicate soul. He knew better than anyone just how vulnerable she could be.

That was the reason he wanted to wrap a protective arm around her shoulder, but he held back, knowing she'd never allow it.

"Back to the infirmary?" he asked instead.

"We were told to wait here for news." Tressa wrung her hands. "But I say, yes, let's go check on him."

"Let's go." Bastian cocked two fingers at Tressa, urging her to follow.

Between jostled elbows and tiny, brown furry animals on rope leashes with eyes as wide as saucers, he and Tressa slowly made their way back to the infirmary. He paused outside the heavy wooden door.

Tressa grabbed the knocker, letting it thud against the dark wood. They waited moments before the door opened only a crack, a bloodshot eye peeking out at them.

"Oh, it's you two again. He's not awake yet. Come back in a few days."

The door slammed shut.

Bastian balled his hand into a fist, pounding on the door. "Let us in. We want to see our friend."

The door opened again, but before the man could slam it on them,

Bastian stuck his foot between the door and the frame. He pushed it open, sending the physic sprawling backward into the room.

Tressa strode in ahead of him. "Where's Connor?" Her head whipped around as she searched the room for him.

Bastian grabbed the man by his collar. Then he noticed the bed Connor had been on when they left was empty. The sheets were changed and tucked in so tight and cleanly it was obvious no one had lain on them.

"Connor? Who's that?" the man asked, his voice practically a squeal.

"Our friend. The one you just said wasn't awake yet." Tressa closed in on him, her nose only inches from his.

It was never a good idea to annoy Tressa, particularly where Connor was concerned. Bastian gripped the man a little tighter, letting the collar of his shirt dig a little bit more into his neck.

"He's been moved. Temporarily."

"Why?" Tressa bared her teeth at the man. She couldn't hurt a fly; Bastian knew that. Still, she put on a good show.

The other man didn't. He trembled in Bastian's grip like a scared kitten.

"Tell us where he is and we'll let you live." Bastian said it matter-of-fact. Tressa wouldn't kill him, but Bastian had no qualms about ripping his head off. His muscles quivered and his blood rushed at the thought of finally unleashing the anger he'd tempered most of his life.

It was hard being born a warrior in a town where peace was paramount. Tressa understood that about him. Her hand found its way onto his bicep, calming him. She knew the effect she had and had exercised it many times throughout their lives. Not since they'd been uncoupled. Those were the three hardest years of his life.

The man sputtered, a tiny trail of spittle leaked from the side of his pursed lips. "I don't know."

Bastian squeezed his collar tighter.

"I don't. The soldiers came back right after you left and took him. I have no say in the matter. I would have saved him if it were up to me. I don't kill!" Tears slipped out of his eyes and down his cheeks.

Tressa nodded at Bastian. So she believed him. Bastian wasn't sure he did, but he couldn't kill the man for no reason. Slowly he let go of the man's collar.

He scrambled backward, putting two arm's lengths between him and Bastian's unclenched fist.

"Can you tell us who took him?"

"Doesn't matter." The man shook his head from side to side, his grey hair falling in stringy strands over his eyes.

"Why not?" Bastian asked.

“He’ll never be the same. Not after they’ve taken him.”

Bastian’s heart thundered in his chest. “What will they do?”

The man shrank farther away from Bastian.

He could feel his cheeks taking on a red glow as his anger swept through him. “What will they do?” he repeated.

“I don’t know,” the man stuttered. His eyelids snapped shut, squeezing so tight his face melted into wrinkles. His fingers pawed at his eyelids, trying to force them open.

“What’s happening to him?” The panic in Tressa’s voice rose with each word.

The physic’s mouth wrenched to the side. Garbled words mixed with vomit spewing from his lips. Bastian put an arm in front of Tressa, holding her back. She ducked, slipping out from underneath it before he could stop her.

“You don’t know what’s wrong with him,” Bastian yelled at her.

She glared at him over his shoulder. “I don’t care. He’s the only one who knows where Connor might be. I’m risking it.”

Tressa slid into to a crouch, avoiding the growing pile of vomit on the floor.

“Help me.”

“I don’t know how.” Tressa placed a hand on his shoulder. Bastian shuddered, wanting desperately to yank her away from the man. “Tell us where they took Connor. Please.” The desperation in her voice got to the physic. Either that or he knew his time left was short.

“Seek absolution,” he said, his speech garbled.

A large crack startled both Bastian and Tressa, sending her backward into his waiting arms. The physic’s neck fell to his shoulder in at unnatural angle, broken. His chest no longer lifted with life-sustaining breath.

“Dead.” Bastian said. He rested his chin on Tressa’s head.

“Magic,” she whispered. She pushed out of his arms, the immediate shock dissipating.

“Does that surprise you, considering what we’ve seen so far?”

Tressa shook her head. “What do you think he meant about seeking absolution?”

“For his sins?” Bastian asked. “Or for Connor?”

“Or for us? You were about to kill him. I was threatening him. Maybe he thought we were in the wrong. It’s possible he didn’t know anything.”

Bastian nodded. “I think he did, though. He said no one ever came back the same. He was expecting Connor to be like them, whoever they are. This isn’t the first time.” Bastian licked his lips and cleared his throat. He’d stayed silent and stoic most of his life, protecting everyone from his temper. He couldn’t do it to Tressa, not now, not

when Connor was missing.

“That’s right. He did say that.” Tressa tapped a finger against her chin, gazing at the dead man. She whirled around, her hands on her hips. “Then we have to seek absolution. Find the nearest holy place. Maybe they’ve got Connor there. Or someone there knows something.”

“Agreed.”

A knock at the door startled them. “Rangar, are you in there? I need some herbs for Mahina’s cough.”

Bastian nodded toward the back of the room and a door. He hoped it led outside. Tressa ran toward it and flung the door open. Bastian tried not to let out a sigh. He would have checked carefully first, before exposing them to whatever lay on the other side. Luckily it was a door to a back alley, just as he’d hoped, and no one jumped in to apprehend them.

Tressa waved to him. Bastian took one last look at the dead man. Regret cut through his chest as he bolted toward the door. They might’ve gotten answers out of him, if only someone, or something, else hadn’t intervened and ended the conversation forever.

He didn’t say it to Tressa as they ran down the alley, but if someone had purposely ended the physic’s life to keep him from talking, it meant someone knew Bastian and Tressa had discovered Connor was missing.

Chapter 20

Buildings flashed past her vision, but Tressa didn't stop to marvel at how different some of them were from Hutton's Bridge. Only Connor mattered. She picked up her pace.

"Tressa!" The strained whisper came from behind her.

Tressa slowed down, allowing Bastian to catch up.

"We can't leave the alley in a run. Maybe if we slow down, we'll fit in," he said.

"Fit in?" Tressa held back a snort of laughter. "We're not dressed like anyone else out there."

She looked down at her rough, woolen dress. Her breeches were still hidden underneath. Tressa grabbed the waistband, her fingers fumbling with the ties holding her skirt tight around her waist.

"Do you need some help?"

Tressa looked at Bastian. Memories flashed in her head of the night they'd been coupled. The night he'd first undone the ties of her dress. A blush spread over her cheeks. She looked down, her hair covering her flaming cheeks like a veil.

"Of course not. I can take care of my own clothes." Her fingers finally found the knot. She deftly released the ribbons from their balled prison. The skirt slipped easily over her hips. Tressa stepped out of the skirt, balled it up, and put it in her bag. "At least I look somewhat like the other women now. I haven't seen one woman in a skirt. Have you?"

She looked at Bastian, who opened his mouth, then closed it without uttering a word. Tressa remembered the dancer in the tavern. She'd been wearing a skirt. At least she had when they walked in. Tressa was pretty sure she'd taken it off before they left.

"And you..." Tressa reached up, running her fingers through Bastian's hair. He tensed under her touch, but she didn't stop. "The men here comb their hair back from their face. Yours is too messy."

Bastian didn't respond again. Typical. He'd grown more and more silent with her every year past their uncoupling. That was why they'd stopped talking to each other. Tressa didn't believe in one-way conversations. Once she'd stopped addressing him directly, he'd never

taken the initiative to communicate with her. If it weren't for Connor, the two of them might never have spoken to each other again.

She stepped back and looked at him. "Okay. You look a bit better now."

"We both look like outcasts," Bastian mumbled. "They'll know." His hand rested on the hilt of his sword, hanging from his hip.

A loud clanging startled them both. Bastian and Tressa peered out of the alley. "Can you see anything?" Tressa stood on her tiptoes, but the gathering crowds were blocking everything in the distance.

Bastian strained his neck upward. "No, probably not much more than you."

He was taller than Tressa by a head. Even that wasn't enough. It looked as if the entire town was streaming into the square. The crowd pushed, elbows flying in every direction as they all clamored to get closer to the wooden building in the center of the square.

The bell continued, getting more frantic with each clang. Tressa's heart beat in time with the sonorous ringing. The crowd fell to its knees, their heads bowed in supplication toward the building.

Women began to wail, waving their arms in the air. Men beat their chests, creating a thundering so intense, Tressa had to wonder if they were actually hurting themselves.

She looked up at Bastian, her eyes wide. "What is this?"

"I don't know. Do you remember any stories like this from Sophia?"

Tressa closed her eyes and thought, trying to remember anything that might help them know what to do. "No." She shook her head. "But we're more conspicuous standing here than we were a few moments ago worrying about our clothes."

"You're right. Let's go." Bastian grabbed her elbow, steering Tressa into the crowd of people.

They dropped to their knees. Bastian thumped his fist against his chest. Tressa threw her arms up in the air in imitation of the women around her. She opened her mouth, but didn't utter a sound. The wrong noise at the wrong moment would mark her as an interloper.

The bell stopped. Silence draped over the crowd like a blanket. Tressa dropped her arms to her sides, mimicking the woman next to her. Bastian shuffled closer to her until their shoulders were barely touching.

"Gaze now upon the glory!" The voice came from the front of the crowd.

Tressa lifted her chin, only after seeing the woman next to her do so, and glanced at the spectacle on the steps to the building. The woman who'd plucked them from the edge of the fog stood on the top step, her arms spread in the air.

Her braided ponytail hung to the ground, woven with ribbons shining against the rays of moonlight. The blue leather hugging her body looked recently buffed.

She grasped the large knockers on the door, flinging them open. Her braid swayed to the side, glinting as if a million stars were woven into it.

A puff of smoke preceded a loud scratching noise.

“Are you ready to seek absolution?” She screamed at the crowd.

The wailing and beating began again, drowning out her words. People rose to their feet. The crowd closed in on them. Tressa’s breath caught in her chest. The people squeezed in tighter, cutting off her view of the building.

Bastian leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Seek absolution? That’s what the physic said to do.”

“Then I guess we’re in the right place.” Tressa jumped up, trying to see over the masses of people blocking her view.

“Quiet,” the woman next to her hissed. “Let Queen Stacia speak.”

Queen? Tressa mouthed it to Bastian. The woman who’d captured them wasn’t just a military leader, she was their ruler.

“Will he forgive the trespasser?” Stacia shouted. She gestured to somewhere in the crowd.

Tressa could only see her arms and head, the rest cut off by the crowd. More heads appeared above the crowd, climbing the steps toward her. They held something between them, their muscles bulging with the effort. A shock of sandy hair rested on the shoulder of one of the men in back.

“Connor,” Tressa whispered to Bastian. He didn’t need to respond. The automatic tightening of his bicep told her he saw the same thing she did.

Chapter 21

Bastian strained against Tressa's grip, holding him back from pushing his way through the crowd to Connor's side. He was so close, but assuming everyone there would be against them, Bastian knew trying to rescue him now would only get Tressa and him taken hostage too.

Bastian relaxed, forcing himself to take steady breaths. His muscles unclenched. Tressa's hand dropped to her side. His eyes focused on the scene at the front, burning holes into the backs of those who carried Connor.

Stacia raised her arms higher in the air. "Let us pray!" she shouted.

As one, the crowd intoned, "Lead us. Forgive us. Take the trespasser. Make your judgment on all."

Tressa put her hand on his arm again, but this time it wasn't enough. Bastian pushed his way through the masses, elbowing anyone who wouldn't move. He didn't even look behind him. He knew Tressa was there, following. She wasn't the type to hide.

Bastian advanced on the woman in blue. His chest heaved with every breath, pushing the apprehension down and replacing it with grit determination. The crowd parted, now aware someone was breaking tradition. Women cowered in front of him. Hands pawed at his feet. He trudged on until he arrived at the wooden dais.

The twelve men in black surrounded Stacia. Bastian couldn't see more than the blue boots on her feet. The shiny toes peeked out between the black boots of her guard.

"Fools! Let me be!" The men parted and Stacia stepped toward the edge. She held out a hand to Bastian.

He grasped it in his. With a surprising strength, she pulled him up. Bastian's knees scrambled over the edge, gaining purchase on the rough wood. He stood up and reached out to help Tressa up, but the guards surrounded him just as they had Stacia a moment ago.

"She is not allowed on the sacred stage. Her," Stacia wrinkled her nose, "womanhood will sully the ceremony. You interrupted us. Pray for forgiveness. You'll need it."

"You're a woman too," Tressa called out from below.

“You have no idea what I am.” Stacia’s lips turned up in a snarl. Her head snapped back to Bastian. “Step forward. Come see your friend.”

Bastian followed her to Connor’s side. Connor’s head lay limp, lolling on his shoulder. Eyelids closed. Bastian willed them to open, for his friend to spring to life. Together they might be able to fight their way out.

The men crowded behind Bastian, cutting off his view of Tressa completely.

Bastian looked closer at Connor’s neck. He reached out a hand, but Stacia slapped it before he could search for a pulse.

“He is alive. If he was dead, someone else would be in his place.” Stacia looked Bastian up and down, starting with his head and ending with his feet, as if she were tasting every inch of him. “Perhaps you, though perhaps not. You’re not exactly what we’re looking for.”

“And Connor is?” Bastian asked. “Why?”

Stacia threw her head back. Her braid, studded with metal spikes, scraped the wooden planks, leaving scratch marks in its wake. Her neck rolled to the side, her braid following like a snake. “Because you’re far too scrumptious to sacrifice!”

She pushed him backward. Bastian fell on his ass, his hands smarting from slapping the wood. Stacia’s head wound again, faster this time. Her braid ascended, sparkling in the waning light of evening.

“Sacrifice is ours. We commend his spirit to the cycle!”

The crowd ululated, their voices reaching a fevered pitch. Bastian scrambled to his feet, but he couldn’t match the speed of Stacia’s murderous braid. The sharp tips of metal lashed at Connor’s body. Flesh and blood sprang from his body, showering Bastian with tiny pieces of his best friend.

“No!” Bastian lunged toward Connor, but three of the men held him by his arms and waist.

Stacia chortled as her braid ripped Connor into a blur of maroon streaks. Bastian gagged at the copper scent tickling his nose. He’d smelled it a million times before helping with the slaughter of animals in Hutton’s Bridge. Knowing it came from his best friend forced bile to rise from his stomach. He swallowed it back, refusing to show any weakness in front of the people he wanted to destroy.

Stacia stepped back. Blood ran down her face to her chest.

The tall door behind Connor opened slowly. A puff of smoke preceded a clicking noise. Bastian looked back into the crowd. Tressa stood at the edge, her eyes wide, frozen in place. He swung back to the door. Three claws scraped on the wood planks.

With each tap they moved ever closer to Connor’s body. He was so

still. Bastian could only hope he was dead, unable to experience the horror surrounding him.

The claws marched closer and closer, each second more agonizing than the last. Bastian realized he'd stopped struggling against his captors. His arms were slack, defeat pouring out of every vein. Still, the men held onto him with grips tighter than newly forged manacles.

"Let me go," Bastian growled at them. Their heads were trained on Stacia, refusing to acknowledge Bastian's command. He stepped to the side, crushing the toes of the man on his right. Faster than lightning, Bastian yanked the injured man to the side, knocking out the guard on his right. With his newly free hand, he slammed his fist into the nose of the man behind him.

"Get Connor," Tressa yelled from behind him.

Bastian bent over, prepared to rush through anyone in his way. Until the claws snapped forward, curled around Connor, and pulled him through the doorway.

The crowd erupted in cheers. Bastian shot Stacia a look of hatred. She replied with a smile. Her tongue crept out the side of her mouth, licking Connor's blood and pieces of his flesh off her lips. She blew Bastian a kiss. "Go now. Run. There's nowhere for you to hide. We will find you again."

She slipped through the doorway, following the beast and his best friend's body.

Bastian leapt off the dais, grabbed Tressa's hand, and tugged her away from the crowd.

"That's not the first time we've seen one of those."

Bastian glanced down at her. "What are you talking about?"

"That was another dragon, just like the one that died in our village."

Bastian's anger grew. He'd been so blinded by the vicious woman and the way she'd flailed on Connor to make the connection. Another dragon. More myth come to life.

Chapter 22

Tressa didn't let go of Bastian until they were well away from the town. She laid a hand on the rough bark of a tall tree. Her panting led to a raspy voice. "Can we stop now?"

She slipped her hand out of Bastian's.

"I don't know where to go," Bastian admitted.

"We should try to get back to our village. Let them know there is a way out. Maybe with more people to help, we can find a cure for the plague. We need to tell Hazel what happened to Connor." Tressa's heart ached, knowing how devastated Hazel would be. "And you should be with your wife."

She glanced up at him. Bastian kicked the tree, and then stalked away ten paces. "Why do you do that?"

Tressa thought to say, "Do what?" but she knew he would see right through her. He always did. Instead she said, "Because it's the way things are."

"Nothing is as it was. We've escaped. Connor's dead." Bastian motioned her toward him.

Tressa took a few tentative steps, not sure what he wanted. His eyes softened, standing in stark contrast to the blood on his vest. Connor's blood. It was all they had left of him. The only item they could offer to Hazel in consolation.

She closed the distance between them. Her fingers fumbled at the buttons on Bastian's vest, setting free the three wooden orbs from the looped fabric. She touched Bastian's shoulders. The vest pushed backward. Her hands slid down his arms, until the vest was at his wrists.

"Take it off." Tressa drowned in Bastian's blue eyes. Her fingertips grazed his wrists.

"If I take this off, I'm shedding the last of my ties to Hutton's Bridge. That includes Vinya."

"You have a daughter."

"I grew up without a father. So did you."

His breath lingered on Tressa's forehead, stirring that longing she'd spent so many years suppressing. She tore her gaze away from his. "I

don't want to be the one responsible for your daughter growing up without her father."

"No one is responsible for anyone else's choices. Despite what your guilt may tell you, my desperate desire to have you in my arms again isn't forced. It isn't a game. It isn't nostalgia. Whether we're here, facing an uncertain future, or back in the village, the only consistent want I've ever had is you."

Tressa read the truth in his face. It was the only truth she'd ever known outside of her love for Granna. Bastian was hers and she was his. She may have tried to fill that void with Connor's friendship. Connor had become the wall between them.

The wall had fallen. So had her resolve.

Tressa ripped the vest off of Bastian, tossing it onto the ground. She tugged on the string at Bastian's neck. His shirt opened. Tressa's hands reached under his shirt, her fingernails scratching at his muscled stomach.

A groan slipped from Bastian's lips. Tressa lifted his shirt up and over his head. He took it off the rest of the way and tossed it.

Bastian grabbed her forearms, forcing her hands from his body. "Are you done fighting me, Tressa?"

"I'll never stop fighting, Bastian. We have to get rid of the fog, lead our people out, and figure out how to kill that bitch who killed Connor. But I swear right now, on the life of my sweet Granna, I will never deny you again."

Bastian lifted Tressa into his arms. Her toes dangled just above the ground as he kissed her for the first time in years. To her, it felt like they'd never stopped being together. In her mind they hadn't. This is where they were supposed to be.

"There's no bed. No cover," Bastian growled into her ear as they sank into the soft grass.

Tressa nibbled on his ear. "That never stopped us before."

Chapter 23

Tressa woke in Bastian's arms. Nothing but Bastian's cloak shielded them from the waning night. A faint thumping in the distance grew louder with each passing moment. It sounded like an animal, a big one, coming toward them.

"Bastian!" She smacked his chest.

"More? Aren't you tired yet?" He groaned, rolling over and out from under the cloak.

Moonlight bounced off of his thighs, exposing every part of him. Not that she hadn't seen it all before.

"Something's coming!" She sat up, but pulled the cloak over her chest.

Bastian grabbed his breeches and shimmied into them. Tressa wished they'd had the whole night to themselves. The sun wasn't even cresting before trouble decided to search for them. She grabbed her dress, pulling it over her head. The linen felt too heavy compared to the lightness she'd experienced in Bastian's arms. At least this time she knew there would be more later. The last time they'd been together, she'd cried the whole time, knowing she'd never feel him in that way again. Their final goodbye, stolen in the meadow next to the fog where no one would search for them, closed a door neither of them dared open again, even though both left a hand on the latch in their hearts.

A great beast, hooves as solid as a tree, and hair hanging from its neck reared up next to them. Taller than a cow, but unmistakably a horse. The last one they'd had in Hutton's Bridge died forty years ago. Without a significant pasture to roam, their horses became lame and weak, eventually unable, or unwilling, to reproduce. Granna had told Tressa about their magnificence. One more of Granna's stories come to life.

A man sat atop the horse's strong back, his legs grasping tight to the horse's barrel, reminding Tressa of her own legs wrapped around Bastian a few short hours ago.

A blush spread across her face. It wasn't shame; it was anticipation for what lie ahead.

Bastian drew his sword, his other arm hovering in front of Tressa.

Tressa eyed the man. He didn't wear all black like the soldiers who'd taken and killed Connor. His dark hair was cut short. A mustache graced his upper lip and a friendly twinkle sparkled in his eyes. No, he wasn't here to harm them. A simple passerby, perhaps.

"I've been looking for you," he said, his voice steady and non-threatening.

A shape swooped from above and landed on Tressa's shoulder. "Nerak!" She reached up and ruffled the owl's feathers.

The man chuckled and slipped off his horse. Bastian still hadn't lowered his weapon, his muscles as tense as ever.

Tressa rested a hand on his arm. "If he's with Nerak, I'm sure he's okay."

"You don't know that," Bastian said. "She may have led us out of the fog, but she also took us straight toward Stacia's army."

A shadow fell across the man's face. "Stacia is our enemy. She may be the queen," his eyes were downcast, but filled with fire, "but she's had us under her thumb for too long. We've been waiting for you."

Nerak dug into Tressa's shoulder. "You have the wrong people," she said. "We've only recently arrived here. We're not from this land."

"I'd know my own daughter anywhere." He reached out his hand.

Before he could connect with her trembling cheek, Bastian's arm shot out, blocking him.

"Don't touch her," he warned.

The man pulled his hand back, unruffled. "Are the two of you coupled?" The man lowered his eyes to their partially dressed bodies. He'd managed to avoid making their lack of clothes an issue until that moment.

"Yes," Bastian said, "since she first pulled my ribbon from the basket."

The man nodded. "Congratulations, Tressa, for finding a man who cares for you. It's unusual when marriage is left to fate and reproduction."

Tressa's mouth hung, slack. He knew her name.

"It doesn't mean anything," Bastian whispered in her ear. "He could have been sent by Stacia."

Tressa ignored his breath on her cheek, giving her full attention to the man in front of her. She didn't remember her father. He'd left when she was only a babe, leaving her to Granna's care. He knew disappearing into the fog was a death sentence. No one ever returned. No one lived.

She, Bastian, and Connor had proven them wrong. There was life beyond the fog. If they could survive, why couldn't her father?

Nerak's talons dug into her again. *Truth. Believe.*

But if he lived, why didn't he ever come back for her and Granna? Her heart tugged at the thought. It was the same decision Bastian made. To stay with her. Not to run back the first chance he got.

"I couldn't find my way back," the man said, answering her unasked question. Her father, if she believed him. "I tried. I failed. And I wasn't the first. There's a small community of us in the forest."

"And Stacia lets you live?"

He sighed and looked over his shoulder. "She doesn't know we're there. Unlike Hutton's Bridge, which everyone knows about, she doesn't realize some of us escaped. We remain hidden."

"We should at least go to his village," Tressa said, despite her trepidation. "Where else can we go, Bastian?"

Bastian's eyes narrowed. She knew he didn't believe a word the man said. She wasn't sure she did either. They had no options other than to wander.

The man shook his head. "You're Bastian? Incredible! Your mother, Jayne, lives in the community." He laughed. "I should have seen the resemblance. You have the same eyes."

Bastian swung his gaze to the man. "My mother is dead."

"No, she's not. She left six years after I did. I know because I found her bloodied at the edge of the forest, alone. The other two people with her died in the fog. By some miracle, she found her way out. Do you remember her?"

Bastian nodded slowly. Tressa could only imagine the pain flooding through him. She'd never known her father. He was but another story of Granna's. Bastian was a small child when his mother was chosen. Tressa remembered the way he clung to the edge of her skirt, weeping, begging her not to go.

She had patted him on the head, urging him to be brave. She promised she'd see him again. For the first year he stood at the edge of the fog every spare moment, waiting for her to come back. When she didn't, he withdrew into himself even more. He shunned everyone but Tressa and Connor, leaving the rest of the village behind before he'd ever had the chance to cross the fog.

"We will follow you," Bastian finally said. "If you're lying, I'll gut you."

"Fair enough," the man said. He looked at Tressa. "Would you like to ride?"

The beast huffed a warm breath out its nostrils and pawed the ground with its hooves. She shook her head. "I think I'll walk."

"We all will." He took the lead in his hand. "Follow me. We must hurry before day breaks and Stacia's people find us."

They walked in silence for a few moments when he spoke again. "I'm sorry about your friend."

“How do you know about Connor?” Tressa asked. Bastian stalked silently next to her, lost in his thoughts.

“I was in town when they called for everyone to repent. I saw the whole thing. The two of you were obviously not from the town. Your hair, your clothes, everything was wrong. It’s not unusual for Stacia to bring in outsiders. Her riders frequently catch people from other kingdoms near our borders. But I knew that was not the case with the two of you.”

“How?” she asked.

“Because when I saw you, I thought I was looking at the wife I had who’d died in childbirth. You could be her twin, Tressa.” He sniffled tears back. Whether it was from manly pride or good self-control, Tressa didn’t know, but she was glad he did. Enough tears had been spilled.

Bastian stalked ahead of them, mumbling something about scouting. Tressa let him go. Typical Bastian. He would need time to sort through his feelings, ones he likely would repress until he could see the woman the man claimed was Bastian’s mother.

“Why did you say you’d been looking for us?” The word “father” had been on the tip of her tongue. She didn’t dare utter it. Not yet. There was more proving to be done before she’d allow herself.

“Every year, on the day three are sent into the fog, we send out a scouting party. We wait five days, no more, no less for survivors. I wasn’t looking for you, specifically. I never hoped to see you again.”

Tressa glowered at him.

He held up his free hand. “Before you judge, hear me out. I know about the horrors in the fog. I lived through them, by some miracle. I never wanted you to face them, Tressa. I hoped for a long, happy life in Hutton’s Bridge with a husband you could tolerate, and maybe love, and many children.”

The pit in her heart grew wider at the mention of children. Being barren was a black mark on her value as a human in Hutton’s Bridge. But now, with Bastian in this new place, where success didn’t depend fully on the fertility of each woman, Tressa hoped the chasm would heal itself.

“Speaking of children, if you are coupled and bonded, where are your children?” His eyebrows crinkled together. “They never send a couple out to the fog. The leaders were never so cruel. Why are the two of you here? What became of your family?”

“It is only the two of us,” Tressa said, her voice low and steady. She didn’t know him, or have any measure of his compassion to their situation. Nor did she particularly want to explain it to him. What lay between her heart and Bastian’s was theirs alone. It was too precious to give it over to a veritable stranger for judgment.

"I'm sorry." He patted her arm. "I know what it is like to lose someone I love." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry I left you behind. I was grief-stricken when your mother died."

"Granna raised me just fine." Tressa couldn't imagine another upbringing. Granna had loved her completely and she in return. She'd wondered about her father, but never missed him.

"How is my grandmother?" he asked, laughing. "She was so spirited, I swore she'd never die."

Tressa's voice lowered. "She died only a few days ago. There's a plague overtaking the village."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"Now you know why we must find our way through the fog and back to the village as soon as possible."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't allow that."

"What? Then why search for survivors each year?" She was confused. "Have you given up on Hutton's Bridge?"

"All will be explained when we arrive at the village. I promise, what we have to tell you will make sense. Just give us a chance."

Tressa looked ahead for Bastian. His red hair stood out among the tall, green grass. She wanted to go back for her people. She wasn't sure Bastian would agree.

Chapter 24

Before the sun lit the tops of the trees, they arrived in the village. Bastian kept his hand on the pommel of his sword, still convinced treachery might await them. The man knew too much and exactly how to leash their hearts to his will. Despite wanting to kill him and move on with Tressa, the boy in Bastian had to know the truth.

Was his mother still alive? Had she kept her promise to see him again? And would he even recognize the woman who'd been elevated to ultimate perfection in his mind?

Despite the law not to bear arms, for years he'd trained with the sword in private. It had been his goal to go into the fog and find his mother. Bring her back. Everyone thought he belonged in the forge because of his strength. Little did they know the strength came from the secret training, driven by only one goal.

When he began to look at Tressa as more than just a playmate and friend, his focus shifted to protecting her. The lengths he went to save her from the fog were successful, until the last choosing. Someone thwarted his efforts, rigged the game. He swore if he ever found out who, they'd die by his hand. Slowly. Painfully.

He volunteered to go with her, only to be with her in the moment she died. He never suspected, not for a moment, that they'd take another breath in the fog. It was a death sentence. If it wasn't, his mother would have come back for him. Wouldn't she?

Inside a thick copse of trees far away from the road stood four cottages. Crudely constructed, but his sharp eye told him they were more solid than they appeared. A trick for the casual onlooker. In fact, the entire settlement appeared abandoned. The stones surrounding the fire pit listed to the side, sloppy and forlorn. Bastian sauntered over to it. Just as he suspected – the fire had been put out with water, ashes scattered. It looked old. It was only another well-constructed illusion.

"The trees block the firelight in the evening. At least most of it. We're very cautious."

Bastian didn't turn around to see whose voice it was. He already knew. It was the same one that had sung to him every night before

bed when he was afraid of monsters lurking in dark corners. The same voice that had soothed him when he tripped and skinned his knee. The same voice that had promised she would be back for him.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Light as a feather, but weighted with so many bittersweet memories and unresolved expectations.

“Mother,” he said, turning around.

“You used to call me Mama.” A tentative smile graced her face. She’d once had a full head of red hair. Now silver strands of hair reflected the sunlight. A few more wrinkles than he remembered had settled around her eyes. Other than that, she was the same woman whose skirts he hid behind when kids more clever and quick of tongue teased him.

“You didn’t come back.” Childish? Perhaps. What else was to be expected around his mother? “I don’t know you as I once did.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know how to get back. After what I went through in the fog, nearly losing my life half a dozen times to beasts I couldn’t see...” Her voice trailed off. “I don’t even remember how I ended up outside the fog. Fenn, Tressa’s father, he found me and carried me here. I woke up in that cottage,” she pointed to the first one on the left, “and began life anew. It was months before I could use my arm again. Even now it’s not as it was.” She shrugged, a smile on her face. “It’s enough, though. It’s far better than being dead.”

Bastian reached out, pulling his mother into his arms. The last time he’d seen her, he fit into her embrace, but now it was the opposite. He held her as if she were the child and he the adult. Her small stature surprised him. She’d always seemed like such a giant, her personality more boisterous than anyone else. Now he knew it was to make up for her petite size.

“I missed you, Mama.” Bastian rested his chin on her head. “I waited for you. Every day for years.”

She rubbed his back. “I know. I thought of you every day, too. I still do. Even this morning, I woke up and said a prayer for your safety and happiness.”

He pulled back, releasing her from his embrace, and becoming an adult again. “Do you remember Flora? She had a son named Connor?”

His mother nodded. “Of course. You two played together as babies.”

“He was captured after we emerged from the fog. Taken to the city and sacrificed to what we believe was a dragon.”

Her hands flew to her mouth, trembling. “Not another.”

Bastian’s eyebrows furrowed. “Another? This is a common occurrence?”

She shook her head. “Every year, they sacrifice a man to the beast. We don’t know why. We’ve been attempting to find out, but no one

knows unless they are in the queen's inner circle." Jayne put her hand on Bastian's back. "Come, let's join the others by the fire. They will tell you more. I'm a relative newcomer to the village."

"But you've been here for close to fifteen years."

Her eyes sought out the grass in front of them. The scent of the fire beckoned them closer. Bastian's mouth watered at the thought of a hot meal. All they'd managed to eat was what had been left in their packs after leaving Hutton's Bridge.

"There aren't many of us, Bastian. Only a handful. We haven't seen a survivor from our village in ten years. To find you alive was more than we could have ever hoped for."

"Thanks to that little owl." Bastian pointed at Tressa. She'd already relaxed around her father, warming to him quickly. Tressa was always like that, even though she insisted she was a shy girl. Bastian envied her social skills. He didn't particularly like talking to people – mainly because he didn't like most people. Even if Tressa didn't like someone, she could still put them at ease. "When she sits on Tressa, her eyes glow purple."

His mother looked at him in surprise. "Whose eyes?"

"Tressa's." He glanced back her. She looked over her shoulder and waved. A year ago he would have killed for her to acknowledge him even once. Now she was his again. Or at least she was last night. There were no guarantees anymore.

"Really? That's odd." His mother looked at the owl again.

Bastian held back a laugh. "Do you really expect her to respond?"

"No," Jayne laughed. "Of course not."

Bastian waved his hand in the air. "The owl saved our lives. I didn't trust her, but now," he looked around again at the small village, "I'm convinced."

"I'm sorry Stacia got to you first." His mother laid a hand on his arm. "We were watching, but it was too late."

Bastian was going to respond that it wasn't her fault until Tressa waved to him, motioning them over to the fire. She held a bread bowl in her hands and took a giant slurp from it. "It's vegetable stew. Your favorite!"

Had she forgotten anything from their time together? He still knew the cut of her underthings and the little noise she made when he nipped at her neck. Also that freesia was her favorite scent. But her favorite food? He was hard pressed to remember. She always seemed to like everything he brought her.

Tressa scooted on the log, patting the spot next to her. Bastian swung a leg over and straddled the log next to her. He slid in, wrapping an arm around her waist. She didn't flinch like he'd feared. Instead she snuggled closer and raised the bread bowl to his lips.

“Have some,” she whispered.

The warm liquid streamed down his throat, filling his stomach.

Fenn laughed. “Even after a few years together, they act like a newly coupled pair.”

Bastian looked at Tressa out of the corner of his eye. She didn’t deny it, so neither would he. Instead, Tressa laid a heavy kiss on his cheek. “We’ve loved each other since we were children. I hope our feelings never change.”

“I saw that, even when you were very young. The two of you always had a special connection. Perhaps Sophia manipulated the Coupling. It wouldn’t be the first time.” Jayne winked at Fenn. “I seem to remember you ending up with the one you wanted as well.”

A haunted smile fell over Fenn’s face. “It’s true. I’m sure my grandmother had a hand in our chance to couple. I’m just lucky we were able to conceive.” He glanced at Tressa. “It wasn’t until our last night together that your mother became pregnant with you. The day before she was to choose another ribbon, three months to the day of our last time together, it was confirmed that she was pregnant.” He let out a deep sigh. “I just wish she would have lived long enough to see you smile the first time.”

“I’m sorry, Papa.” Tressa tasted the sweet word on her lips for the first time. She reached over and patted his arm. “Granna always told me how hard it was for you after she died. It was as if a part of you died too.”

“Yes, well, luckily the two of you haven’t known heartbreak like that,” he said.

Bastian gripped Tressa tighter. All was made right now.

“Lucky us,” Bastian echoed. “Now all we have to do is find a cure for the plague in Hutton’s Bridge.”

“That’s right.” Tressa pushed her hair behind her ears. “We need to find someone with healing knowledge. We’ll find someone in the town to come with us into the fog.”

“It’s a death wish.” Fenn wiped his hands on his trousers and stood. He stalked around the fire. “You can’t go back. Everyone saw Bastian. I saw enough to recognize who he was. It’s not safe.”

“Then I guess we’re going to die.” Tressa ground the dirt with a toe. “We have to get medicine for Hutton’s Bridge. We couldn’t save Connor. We have to save the rest of them. Are you with me?” She looked at Bastian, her eyes wide.

He wanted to grab her head, pull her close, and kiss her. “Of course.”

She gave him a tug. “Good, then. Let’s get cleaned up. We can get started on a plan tomorrow morning. Today, we rest.”

Bastian stood up, stumbling a bit as he trailed after her. She was

just as fearless as she'd always been. Fighting for their village now, even when the stakes were high. It was what he wanted, too. As always, they wanted the same thing.

Chapter 25

Tressa emerged from the cottage into the dark of night, too energized to sleep. Bastian had tired out quickly, snoring only moments after they'd finished making love. Tressa had lain in the dark, eyes wide and thoughts whirling in her mind.

She sat on the log, stirring the remnants of the fire. The ash rustled and surrounded Tressa in a smoky embrace. She shivered in the cool night air.

"Cold?"

She turned and squinted into the darkness. Her father approached, holding out a wool blanket.

"Thanks." Tressa wrapped it around her shoulders. The grey fibers scratched at her neck. It smelled of the forest – pine needles, damp grass, and decomposition.

"I'm worried about Bastian going into town with you." Fenn sat on the log next to his daughter. "Too many will recognize him."

Tressa nodded. "I thought the same. But he'd never agree to waiting here while I went alone."

Fenn stretched out his legs. His blue breeches made his legs almost invisible in the dark. He took a deep breath. "I have medicine here. The kind that might save the others in Hutton's Bridge."

The embers provided little light. The look of shock on her face went unseen. "Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"No one else knows. I wanted it safe, just in case." He ran a hand through his hair. "It's not that I don't trust the others. It's complicated. You don't know what it's been like here. We're together, but only Jayne and I are committed to the lifestyle. The others might take the medicine in the night, trade it for goods."

"Where are the others?" Her father had mentioned them more than once, but she'd seen no one other than him or Jayne.

"Out. Collecting food, supplies, that sort of thing. It's rare for all of us to be here at once. The medicine is something I stole not long ago. I probably shouldn't keep it hidden, but something deep inside told me to."

Tressa nodded. "You're only trying to do what's right. Just like

Granna always did. Even when it wasn't the popular choice, she made the right one."

"I knew you'd understand." Fenn took Tressa's hands in his. "You've grown up to be a wise and beautiful young woman. I'm proud of you."

A flutter in Tressa's chest startled her. His approval meant more to her than she thought it would. She'd never missed him because she had Granna. How could she miss someone she'd never known? Yet, here she was, absorbing his attention like a dry sponge.

"Thank you."

"I've been trying for years to get close to Stacia. To kill her. But I haven't done it yet." He kicked a pebble into the fire pit. It fell through the ashes as easily as a raindrop through a low cloud.

"Why kill her?" Tressa held back a yawn. The exhaustion of the last few days was finally getting to her.

Fenn gestured toward the trees. "Her mother did this to us. Commissioned her magicians to erect a wall of fog around Hutton's Bridge. Stacia maintains it. It's her fault our people continue to suffer." He slammed a fist into his leg. "If Hutton's Bridge were free, we could easily get them medicine. It's just a suicide mission now."

Tressa thought it through, her mind a jumble with ideas. Her father had medicine they could attempt take back to Hutton's Bridge. Yet they'd always be imprisoned by the fog and the beast within. Unless someone killed Stacia.

"Instead," he continued in the silent night, "people are dying. If someone could overthrow Stacia..."

"Maybe I could." It was only a whisper on Tressa's lips. Since the moment Connor died so brutally, she wanted Stacia to suffer a similar fate.

Fenn shook his head. "Absolutely not. You're too unfamiliar with the town. You don't know enough. You'd never be able to do it."

"If I could get close enough, I could do it. I know I could." Tressa's heart pounded. Connor's mutilation replayed, the scent of blood still fresh in her memory. Her fingernails dug into her palms. Through the treetops, the stars twinkled at her. She'd never seen them so clear or bright until that moment. The world opened up to her. She was outside the fog in a land most people in Hutton's Bridge believed was just an old tale. She was living the impossible.

"No." Fenn placed a hand on her arm. "I won't allow it."

She looked at her father, his face covered in the shadows of night. The shape of his chin, the rise of his cheekbones. Yes, they were father and daughter. That much she believed. She would do what he hadn't. "I'll leave just before dawn. Don't tell Bastian where I've gone. Convince him to wait here for me. Tell him to trust me."

Her father nodded. "There's nothing I can do to stop you?"

"No."

Fenn wrapped his arms around his daughter, pulling her into a hug. "Then I will pray for your safety. I want nothing more than to see you again."

"You will. I promise."

"There is something else I wanted to ask of you."

"Anything," she said.

"Did you happen to bring any honey with you from the village? I haven't tasted it in years. You'd be surprised how much a man misses something so simple." Fenn laughed.

"I do have some. I'll leave it for you."

Fenn smiled. "Thank you."

* * *

TRESSA AWOKE in the dark of night. She'd slept fitfully, waiting for the hours to pass and silence to permeate their small encampment. His blanket askew, moonlight touched all the places on Bastian's body Tressa never wanted to forget. Her gaze lingered for only a moment more. Leaning over, she kissed him gently on the forehead. Once Bastian was asleep, it would take an army to raise him before sunlight.

Knowing that allowed her to do what needed to be done. Tressa slipped her shoes on her feet, pulled her gown over her shoulders, tying a knot in the strings that kept it from falling down and exposing too much cleavage.

She pulled a cloak over her clothes, resting the hood on her head. "I love you," she whispered to Bastian, "and I'm sorry."

The wooden door unlatched and opened without a sound, letting the cold air seep in like death's silent keen. A rustling in the leaves, gave her pause. She rested her hand on the door, waiting for another sound.

Stay. Wait. Help.

Tressa shook her head, hoping the little owl could see her in the dark. She didn't dare utter a word for fear of waking anyone. Before she could change her mind, Tressa ran across the open area in the center of the cottages. She darted into the woods.

Walking through the remainder of the night wasn't easy. Not only was she alone, but she was afraid of what lie in wait for her in the dark. Without the skill or strength to fight back against a battle-hardened foe, Tressa knew she didn't stand a chance. The cover of night was her only ally and she would use every second of it she could to get to the town.

Chapter 26

Bastian woke long after sunrise. He stretched out and reached

for Tressa, but only found the wool blanket. He clenched the scratchy fabric. A slow smile spread across his face. Last night had been amazing. They'd made love three times before falling asleep in each other's arms. He'd hoped for a fourth when he woke up, but she was already gone. Probably starving just like he was.

His stomach growled in response. Bastian sat up and pulled his breeches on. They were still filthy. Covered in Connor's blood. He'd have to wash them later. Maybe Tressa would keep him company while they were drying.

Running a hand through his ruffled hair, Bastian stepped out into the cool morning. He hurried to the fire, the sweet scent of cooking meat beckoning him closer. "It smells amazing." Bastian reached out and gave his mother's shoulder a small squeeze.

She smiled. "Thank you. We do what we can here. You're lucky it wasn't lentil soup to break your fast." Jayne leaned over the fire and turned the spit. "Today we have venison. Fenn felled a deer yesterday before he found the two of you." She stood up and looked around. "Where is Tressa? Still sleeping?"

Bastian's mouth watered. "No. She's already up. Not out here with you?"

Jayne shook her head. "Maybe she took a walk with Fenn."

"Who took a walk with me?" Fenn asked, walking into the clearing from the tight thicket of trees, an axe hefted over one shoulder and firewood tucked under the other arm.

"Tressa." Bastian sat down on the log. "Is she with you?"

Fenn didn't answer. He set down the axe next to the pile of firewood and carefully stacked the rest on top. "She didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Bastian asked. He popped a piece of venison into his mouth. He wasn't quite sure what venison was, but he liked it. A little dry. Nothing like the meat he'd grown up on – pigs and cows were their only source – but it was better than nothing. He licked the juice off of his fingertips.

Fenn stared at Bastian. "I thought for sure she'd tell you before she

left..."

"Left?" Bastian sat up. "What do you mean left? Where did she go?"

Fenn looked back at the forest. "Last night she and I had a talk."

"Yes?" Bastian stood. He stalked over to Fenn. "What about?"

"She was concerned for your safety, Bastian." Fenn reached down and plucked off a piece of venison for himself. He blew on it, the steam wafting in front of Bastian's face.

"Where is she?" He held back from grabbing Fenn's shoulders and shaking him. Fenn was Tressa's father. He deserved respect for that, though Bastian's temper was rising and he wanted answers.

"She went back into the fog."

Jayne gasped and dropped the rest of the venison she'd been cooking into the fire. "Oh no!" She wrapped her hand inside her dress and tried to fish it out without burning herself.

Bastian reached in, grabbed the meat, and pulled it out, quickly dropping it on the dirt. Then he looked back to Tressa's father. His face was sad. Eyebrows furrowed. Corners of his mouth turned down.

"You're lying. She wouldn't do that. She wouldn't leave without me." Tressa had sworn that last night while they made love. She'd said they'd always be together. That she loved him. That they'd work through this together.

Fenn shook his head. "I'm sorry. I saw her leave. She called the owl."

"Nerak?" Bastian asked.

"Yes, Nerak. They left together, heading for Hutton's Bridge."

Bastian kicked the log he'd been sitting on. It rolled a few inches closer to the fire. His mother placed a hand on his arm, but he shrugged it off. "Damn her!" He spun around and stared at Fenn. "Why? Did she give a reason for this madness?"

"She said she could sneak through the forest with the owl. That she could find her way back and lead the people out." Fenn sighed. "She was worried you would be hurt like your friend Connor. She said she couldn't stand to lose you like she lost him." He paused and took a deep breath. "I told her to tell you before she left. I begged her to."

"She didn't. Obviously." Anger swept through him. He clenched his fists, attempting to stop the tremors. "How long ago was this? Early this morning? Late last night? When?"

"Late last night." Fenn shook the dirt off a piece of venison, then popped it in his mouth. "She came outside when I was putting out the fire for the night. We had a nice talk about home, but then she started telling me how guilty she felt about Connor's death."

"I thought we were going to find medicine first." Bastian paced, trampling the grass underfoot. "This doesn't make any sense. Why

would she just change her mind and leave for Hutton's Bridge?"

"She's a very strong-willed girl. I'm proud of her." Fenn locked eyes with Bastian. "She was doing this to save you."

"I don't need saving." Bastian picked up a stick and hurled it toward the forest. "I'm going after her."

"It's not wise, Bastian," Fenn said. "You should wait here. You cannot see in the fog like Tressa can with the aid of that owl. Just give her a few days. Hutton's Bridge isn't far. It's possible she can sneak back and get some people out of there quickly. Give her time."

"This is ridiculous." Bastian stalked back toward the cottage. He shoved his belongings back into his pack. The same one he'd unpacked the night before.

It was obvious now what he hadn't noticed earlier. All of Tressa's things were gone. Her bag, her clothes. It wasn't much, but her absence now screamed at him. He wanted to kick himself for not noticing before. It would have saved him precious time.

Bastian's hands shook. She was out there, alone. Well, with that stupid owl, but the bird wouldn't do anything to help her if that beast came sniffing around again. He kicked the table. Hard. His toe throbbed. He kicked it again. And again until the leg snapped and the table listed to the side.

A knock at the door gave him pause. "Who is it?"

"Your mother. Can I come in?"

He flung the door open. "You can't talk me out of leaving."

"I'm not here to do that." She glanced at the table, but didn't say a word about it. "I wanted to tell you goodbye. The last time we parted, you were only a small child. I promised I'd come back for you and I didn't." Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes.

Bastian reached out and she slipped into his arms. "It's okay. Someone had to go every year."

"I didn't volunteer. Not like Fenn did."

He wanted to tell her he knew, but he didn't. No one would ever talk about his mother after she was gone. It was as if she'd never existed. A year later his father died and his Uncle Adam raised him.

She stepped back and grasped Bastian's hands. "There's something I want to show you before you leave." She pulled up the sleeve of her dress. Three long scars ran the length of it, puckered and silvered with age.

"What gave you those?" He ran a finger along the length of them.

"The beast that hides in the fog. When I crawled out, Fenn found me. He stopped the bleeding, otherwise I might have died." She slid the sleeve down. "I wanted to show you this to give you hope. I survived. Tressa will too. And you will come back." She smiled, her eyes hopeful.

“I will. I promise.” Bastian kissed his mother on the top of her head. “I need to leave now, though. I don’t want to waste more time.”

“I understand. I’ll see you again soon, Son.”

Bastian nodded and left the cottage. He took a deep breath and headed through the encampment and into the forest.

* * *

“THEY’RE BOTH GONE NOW.” Jayne said to Fenn. They had watched Bastian’s back as he entered the forest.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. “I don’t think we’ll ever see either of them again.”

“I hope you’re right.” She leaned in, resting her head on his shoulder. “At least the owl didn’t make any noise when I killed it.”

“Haven’t had owl wings for supper in a long time. Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Fenn.”

“Oh,” he said, pulling something out of his pocket. “Tressa left me a jar of honey.”

Jane’s eyes widened. She blinked. A black slit tore through her blue eyes, changing them to red. She licked her lips with a forked tongue. “We’ve waited many years for this.”

“Our time is about to come.” Fenn smiled and took her into his arms.

Chapter 27

His eyelids felt heavy, like small bags of sand held them closed. Slowly, carefully he opened them. A tearing sensation forced tears into the corner of his eyes, but he didn't stop. With each miniscule movement, he fought to regain his sight and his consciousness.

He knew he'd been out. For how long, he was unsure. He attempted to swallow. The saliva ripped skin on its way down his throat, taking away the sensation of death. Pain was welcome. It screamed in his ear, forcing him to believe he was alive, even though every sense told him he wasn't.

He remembered dying. The pain. The blood. The last moment he heard anything and the white light that met him at the edge. He'd accepted it.

And now he was breathing again. Not easily, but the wind of life flowed through his body.

He felt his body with a light touch. The blood and flesh that had been stripped away from him so fiercely had healed. His skin was smooth, unblemished, and softer than that of his children.

His heart leapt. He had children. A wife he loved with all of his being. He'd left her behind. But why?

"Because she didn't love you anymore. She took another lover and cast you out into the world, penniless and forsaken."

The woman's voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. It dripped with honey and the promise of sunshine. It was kind. It was truthful.

No wonder his heart pained him so much. The woman he'd loved sent him away.

"You stumbled into a forest surrounded by fog. A great beast tore you apart. I found you. I nursed you back to health." Fingertips lightly grazed his forehead.

Warm. Soft. Comforting.

He vaguely remembered the forest and the fog, thicker than the wool of the clothes he wore. Clothes? He'd touched his own body. His skin. There were no clothes. Shame spread over him. No woman,

other than his wife and his mother, had seen him without clothing.

"You are beautiful. Don't be embarrassed." A silken blanket spread across him.

He was grateful. He wanted to thank her, but he still couldn't speak. His lips were spread apart ever so slightly. Not one sound emerged.

"You don't have to talk, sweetling. I can hear you. We have a connection, deeper than any you've ever had with anyone else." She placed a hand under his back, helping him to sit up.

His legs swung over to the side and the blanket fell to his waist, covering the most private part of him. That part he'd kept only for the woman he loved. The one who became his wife and bore his children. The one he swore he'd return to, no matter how difficult. If the voice was to be believed, his wife no longer wanted him.

Memories of dense fog and the snarling of a beast coming after him haunted him. He knew they were true memories. The rest was a blur.

"You've blocked out the pain." She stroked his hair. "It's okay, my darling. Eventually it'll all come back."

He looked at the woman next to him. Her long dark braid fell behind her back, nearly touching the floor. It sparkled in the dim light. Where was he? The walls dripped. Stalactites clung to the ceiling. A cave, then. That explained the moistness in the air and the faint scent of dirt.

She wore a gown of blue. Light bounced off of it, blinding him every time he looked at her. Dazzling. Devastatingly beautiful.

The woman's hand rested under his chin. A nudge. He looked into her eyes. Deep pools of blackness. The azure iris of her eye slit in a vertical line.

"You have no idea how grateful I am that you have woken from your sleep. Your injuries were extensive. Everyone else thought you dead. I am the only one who believed you could be brought back to life."

He was grateful to her too. Though without his wife, he wasn't sure if life was worth living.

"Life can be so much more. You are young. Don't give up so easily." She traced a line down his face to his lips. Her finger lingered there, only a moment, before she drew it back.

He licked his lips. The metallic taste of blood mingled with the sweetness of honey. He swallowed. Looking at her again, she appeared even more beautiful. Radiant.

Her eyelids lowered, her lashes fluttering. "I'm pleased you think I'm attractive."

Despite wanting to fight it, he found himself being pulled toward her. With the passing of every moment, the tender memories of his

wife faded, obstructed by the woman in front of him.

“Yes, that’s right. I feel the same pull to you. It’s only natural. I’ve grown to love you as well.”

Love. It was a word he’d never used lightly. He’d sworn to use it only for one woman. But she’d spurned him. Left him to die.

The woman sashayed in front of him. She nudged his legs apart, stepping between them. Her hands rested on his stomach, just above the blanket that still covered him.

“I want you,” she whispered in his ear, her lips tickling the edge of his earlobe.

He couldn’t form the words to answer. He didn’t need to. With a sudden burst of energy, he reached out, cupping one breast in his hand. She moaned and bit his ear.

The woman pushed him back down on the table. She grabbed the blanket and flung it to the ground. Straddling his waist, she ground into his obvious arousal.

“Now you are mine, Connor.”

Bastian dropped his sword on the ground and tucked his

dagger into the holster around his calf. He needed both of his hands to scale the tree. The limbs rustled like living arms, reaching out for him, threatening to flay his skin. Rough bark dug in, biting his flesh. Still he climbed, desperate to get to the top, hoping he could rise above the fog. Praying he would be able to see Tressa.

He couldn't see the ground any longer, nor could he see the top of the tree. Anchored on a sturdy branch, he felt afloat, drifting in a sea of damp clouds. He was used to the fog surrounding him when he lived in Hutton's Bridge, but the only time it ever enveloped him so completely was in the forest with Tressa and Connor.

Adrenaline pumped through his veins. Losing Connor and Tressa within the space of a day. One through the most bloody death he'd ever seen and the other gone, without a trace. She'd promised him they'd be together. Then she left. She'd vanished with the moon.

Scaling the top of the tree was his only hope of finding her. If she was still wandering, maybe he'd see her. Or he'd see some kind of path. Or figure out where his village was. He knew the fog didn't reach up into infinity. The dying dragon in their village told him that.

He wished, only for a moment, that he had a dragon to fly on. He could soar over the forest, save Tressa, and then rescue everyone in the village.

Bastian steeled himself and began the ascent again. Connor's death would not be in vain.

A bright beam of light cut through the fog. It was only a pinhole, but it was enough to spur Bastian to climb faster. He was close. The air was drier and he could feel a hint of a breeze brushing wisps of his hair to the side.

Closer now. Only a few more branches until the sun broke through the fog. Bastian shielded his eyes with his hand, hanging onto the trunk with his free arm. Holding on carefully, he shimmied from branch to branch, trying to get to the opposite side of the tree where he could hopefully see Hutton's Bridge.

His hand grabbed onto a knot in the trunk, his fingers curling

around the ageless bark. Then he felt it. Flesh.

Bastian tore his eyes away from the forest and looked up at the trunk. A hollow, the size of a human gaped in the trunk. But it wasn't empty. Gnarled within the tree was a woman. Alive or dead, he couldn't discern.

He snatched his fingers away from her toes. At first he'd thought they were knots. He climbed a little higher on a branch, one that looked sturdy enough to hold his weight. To be safe, he balanced against another branch, taking care not to put too much pressure on either.

Bastian took a deep breath. The woman in the tree didn't acknowledge him. Her wrinkled eyes remained closed, forever locked in a dance between life and death. Her heart pounded in her transparent chest. A faint red glow emanated from her heart where it still beat out a slow, even rhythm. If Bastian squinted, he could almost see the forest moving along with her, as if her heart kept it alive.

And maybe it did.

"What kind of magic is this?" He'd seen enough to know he had to suspend disbelief. Hutton's Bridge had exposed him to nothing more than stories. Everything he'd seen had proved there was far more out here than he'd ever suspected.

Her skin was shriveled with age. Her wide eyes glowed green. Her mouth contorted in a gasp of terror. She didn't move, didn't acknowledge him, yet her naked body continued to pulse with a sappy rhythm.

"What are you?" Bastian reached out, caressing her emaciated cheek.

She didn't flinch.

If she was connected to the forest, killing her might end the torment of the fog. His people would finally be free from its tyranny. He'd be able to find Tressa. And yet...

Bastian knew now that staying hidden was better than what was out here. At least when they were unprepared. If Tressa made it back to Hutton's Bridge, if he could join her there, then they could train their people to fight back.

But the woman had done nothing to him. He couldn't even be sure why she was there or if she had anything to do with the fog. Bastian squeezed the hilt of his sword. The blood pumped in his veins, screaming at him to kill her. The scene before him was unnatural. It reeked of evil magic. Even the tree no longer smelled of dew and earth. There was a stench of rot in the air, tickling at his nose, threatening to climb down the back of his throat and gag him.

"No." He said it to himself. A glance out of the corner of his eye assured him. She still didn't acknowledge him. No movement. No life,

despite the pulsing of her exposed heart.

Bastian turned his back on her and gazed out into the forest. He forced himself to focus on finding Hutton's Bridge.

It didn't take long. His eyes skimmed the tops of the trees, honing in on a wall of fog in the distance. It rose into the sky, higher than he could see. He craned his neck upward, careful to maintain his balance on the tree branches.

It appeared there was no end. The tendrils stretched on forever.

A black crow cawed in the distance. A rustle in the tree behind him snatched his attention from the sky. The branches crisscrossing the woman's chest curled away from her body. Her limbs moved in a smooth motion as she stepped away from the hollow.

Bastian scuttled farther out on the branches. They dipped dangerously low, threatening to snap and send him spiraling to the ground. He didn't care. He wouldn't get an inch closer to the naked woman emerging from the womb of the tree.

Her lifeless eyes looked toward the sky, in the direction of the cawing bird. She raised her arms, her palms facing the fog. Her mouth opened; she sucked in a deep breath.

Tendrils escaped the fog, racing through the air toward her, passing over her lips, giving moisture to her shriveled body. Her mouth closed. Her lips warped into a smile, one so vile Bastian wanted to throw himself to his death. Still, he hung on.

Her eyes swept over him, but just as quickly as they'd found him, they were trained on the sky again. The bird came into view.

The woman's mouth opened, her jaw slack. Ice crystals shot out of her mouth and hurtled through the air, stabbing the bird straight through its chest. Wings beat frantically, fighting against the finality of death.

Giving up the struggle, the bird spiraled down into the trees, landing on a mess of branches not far from Bastian.

The woman raised a hand toward the bird. It hurtled through the air, landing in her outstretched palm. She lifted the bird to her mouth and took a bite. Blood gushed, the scent of copper overtaking the rot and moistness in the air. She swallowed the bird with one big gulp.

Her eyes fell on Bastian again. Gliding over the branches as if she had no fear of falling, the woman stood only inches from his feet.

"Leave," she commanded, blood dripping out the sides of her mouth.

The branches broke at her command, sending Bastian falling to the ground.

Bastian opened his eyes to the sound of a piercing screech. He lay in a tangle of branches, not far from the ground. Had they not caught him, his bones could have shattered into a million pieces.

He recognized the sound and held still. It was the same beast in the forest the first time they'd passed through. Few had ever survived one trip. A second was suicide. He knew why he was doing this. For Tressa. Everything was for her.

Bastian hoped he wasn't too late.

"Bastian."

He heard it gliding on the wind. Tressa! He'd know her voice anywhere. Bastian slowly lowered himself to the ground. The fog enveloped him, erasing any chance he had of seeing his way through the forest.

Bastian pulled himself back into the tree and up onto the branches. He could see a bit better above the fog. Looking around, Bastian tried to find another tree close by. If he could move from tree to tree without touching ground, he might be able to avoid the beast hiding in the mist. He only wished he'd thought of it before.

"Bastian."

There it was again. Tressa. His breath came faster, his heartbeat increasing. He shimmied out on the branch and reached for the next one. With a careful foot, he probed the branch. It was strong and stable. Bastian leapt to it, quickly grabbing the upper branches, like outstretched arms of the tree.

He moved like that, just above the fog, trying not to think of another fall. He also wanted to kick himself for not thinking of this the first time he travelled through the mist. Every few minutes he'd hear Tressa's voice again, calling his name. He wished she'd just stay still. It would be much easier to find her.

Terror bubbled in his gut. It was possible the beast out there was chasing her. He had to find her before it did. As long as he could hear her voice, he knew she was still safe. He would reach down, grab her hand, and pull her up into the trees with him. They'd escape together and lead their people out of the fog. Or stay there, safe, guarded by

that strange woman trapped in the tree. He didn't really care as long as Tressa was okay.

He heard her again, louder, much closer. Nearly below him.

"Bastian?"

Bastian looked at the fog below his feet, tendrils wrapping around the toes of his boots.

"It's me. Stay where you are. I'll be right down." He knew she had to be terrified. She'd been out there too long by herself.

Bastian dropped a foot into the fog, blindly reaching for a lower branch. He took a deep breath, as if he were about to submerge underwater. The fog kissed his face, cold, dead. He shivered, but kept up the descent.

"Are you still down there?"

"Bastian?" Tressa's voice sounded closer.

Finally, he touched ground.

"Tressa, talk to me so I can find you. You stay still, okay?"

"Bastian." Her voice trembled.

He turned to the right.

"Bastian!"

He turned to the left.

"Bastian!"

Behind him.

"Tressa, don't move!"

"Bastian!"

In front of him.

"Tressa, please!"

A deep laugh echoed through the thick fog. Spittle flew through the air, landing smack on Bastian's cheek.

He wiped it off with his sleeve.

"Tressa?"

Sweat coated his palms. His hands shook. This wasn't right. Not one bit of it. She would have said more than just his name. She would have stayed still.

Dread spread through his body. His concern for Tressa had him so distracted he hadn't even realized someone, or something, had been deceiving him. Bastian scrambled back to the tree. He reached up, grasping for a branch. His fingertips scratched bare on the hard bark. Finding purchase, Bastian hoisted himself back into the tree.

A scratching noise behind him was followed by a low growl.

Bastian held on to the tree trunk, balancing precariously on a branch that might be too weak to hold him. It bent toward the ground, threatening to dump him at the slightest wrong move.

He stretched his arm out above him, scrambling to find another branch that could carry him even higher.

The wet chortling wafted toward him. A scratching noise tore at the bark on the tree.

Bastian finally felt a branch. He wrapped his hand around it, tugging hard. It didn't budge. With a heave, he pulled himself up, desperate to get higher before the thing below could catch him.

The noise got farther away as Bastian climbed higher. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He shivered and hugged the tree, his muscles screaming for a break. Safety couldn't be far away.

A sharp tip came shooting through the air, piercing Bastian's leg and yanking him back toward the very thing he was desperate to escape.

Chapter 30

Bastian reached up, grabbing the hilt of his sword with his right hand before he fell to the ground, landing with a hard thud on his back. The spike stuck in his leg retracted. His leg throbbed, but he didn't feel any blood. Yet. Quick thinking had kept him alive until now. He wouldn't let a spike stop him.

The fog swirled, blinding Bastian before he could determine where the beast hid. Instead of attacking, he held still on the ground, his sword in front of him at the ready. If his hunch was right, the beast couldn't see him either. If it could, it would have attacked already. It would have gotten them the first time through the forest. Based on Connor's wounds and his mother's scars, Bastian guessed this was what attacked them. He refused to be its next victim.

"Bastian," it said in Tressa's voice again. Honey dripped from its voice, but it was no longer tempting. Was it so foolish to think he'd answer the call?

"Bastian!"

He sat up. That wasn't Tressa. It was Vinya, his wife. The voice came from behind him and sounded very far away.

"Dada!"

His stomach dropped. Farah, his daughter.

A scratching noise on the forest floor jolted Bastian to his feet.

"Shit," Bastian mumbled under his breath. He ran in the direction the voices came from. At least in the direction he best guessed. The screams for him continued.

"Be quiet!" He yelled back. "Don't say another word!"

"Vinya." It wasn't Bastian. Damn it. The beast was playing its game on them too.

"Over here, asshole." Bastian yelled so loud his throat felt it was ripping to shreds.

"Vinya," it said again, ignoring him. Its voice sounded exactly like him.

Bastian's sweaty hands gripped the hilt of his sword. He could follow the voice just as easily as Vinya. Faster, even, because he didn't have a kid to slow him down.

A few moments of silence passed. Good. She'd stayed quiet like he ordered. He could only hope she'd stayed where she was too.

A whimper punctuated the air. "Mama! Where are you?"

Bastian paused. He couldn't find them and he knew what was coming next. He waited for the inevitable.

"Farah," the thing called out to his daughter, using its sweetest imitation of Vinya.

Bastian turned, his sword outstretched and swung it through the air. It planted firmly in something fleshy. A smile crept across his face as the thing in front of him snarled.

He pulled back hard on the sword and made another hacking blow, meeting again with resistance. A gurgling noise sputtered in the air and something wet landed on Bastian's cheek. He wiped it off with his finger, then brought it to his nose. Blood.

Lust raced through his veins. Another hack. Then another and another. More blood spurted on him, driving him into a frenzy.

Something sharp whizzed through the air, landing on his arm. Intense pain surged through Bastian's body. Using the pain, he hit harder and faster, blindly whacking at the beast hidden from him in the mist. Whimpers replaced the snarls. Then silence.

Bastian struck out again, but his sword caught nothing but air. He pointed the tip down and poked. It met with resistance.

Finally. It was dead.

"Vinya," Bastian called out into the gray darkness. "It's me."

Silence.

"Vinya, it's okay now. I killed it. Call out and let me know where you are."

Still silence.

"The only thing it's ever said is anyone's name. Trust me, it's dead." He stayed in one place, waiting for her response.

"Bastian! Why do things always have to be so hard with you?" She huffed, out of breath. "If you would have just stayed home like I told you none of this would have happened. We almost lost our child because of you."

"Me?" He stalked toward the sound of her voice, his anger growing with every step. "Why the hell are you even out here? You should be back at the village, keeping our daughter safe."

She snorted. He corrected his path by a bit to the right.

"It's not safe there. People are dying and the rest of them are fighting amongst themselves. People are hatching plans to escape or to take over from Udor. It's a mess at home, which you would know if you would have stayed like duty dictated."

Bastian was glad she couldn't see the angry snarl on his face, not to mention the beast's blood splattered all over him. Or maybe if she saw

it, she'd keep her comments to herself and fear him his wrath for once. Of course it was his fault for never standing up to her before. For letting her roll over him every moment of every day simply because he'd given up on his happiness when Tressa had been forced out of his bed.

"Have you heard Tressa out here?" He ignored her barbs, instead concentrating on the reason he'd come back into the forest in the first place.

Another large exhalation of breath. Bastian reached out, knowing she had to be only steps in front of him. His hand met with softness, followed by a hard slap.

"You leave me, come back looking for her, then try to grope me?"

Bastian jerked his hand back. He hadn't wanted to touch her there. Not ever again. He was pleased to find it didn't stir anything within him. A woman's breasts were hard to resist, no matter who they belonged to. Not that touching Vinya had ever done much to rouse his desires. He'd done his duty with her. The hope he'd eventually care for her had faded with each day of verbal abuse.

"Have you heard Tressa?" he asked again, tired of giving into her game of fighting. Sometimes he thought she enjoyed it more than anything else in life. Sad, when he really considered it. For a moment, he almost felt sorry for Vinya.

"No, I haven't heard from her. Maybe that thing already ate her. It would serve her right."

Before Bastian could say something equally rude back, he felt a small hand on his leg. "Dada?"

He reached down and picked up Farah. His lips sought out her soft cheek and found it readily. "I missed you."

She snuggled into him. He could almost see her blond curls, just like her mother's, burrowing into his chest.

"What were you hoping to accomplish by coming in here?" he demanded of Vinya.

"I wanted to escape, just like everyone else who's ever gotten out of Hutton's Bridge and never come back. I don't believe for one second that they died out here. I believe they just left and found a better place. Why come back?"

"Why indeed," Bastian grumbled under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just mumbling."

"Like always," she said, smugly.

He imagined her arms were crossed over her chest, an annoyed look on her face. He'd seen it often enough in the last few years.

"I came back because it's the right thing to do. And you're wrong. Not everyone makes it out of here alive. That thing," he pointed over

his shoulder with his thumb even though neither of them could see it, “was happy to kill most of the people that had come out here. It nearly killed Connor and my mother.”

“Your mother?”

Bastian was glad she hadn’t asked about Connor. He wanted to tell Hazel first. It was her right to know before Vinya. “Yes, my mother is still alive. She’s out there, living in hiding.”

“In hiding? Why? Why didn’t she come back?”

“She almost died on her way out. I couldn’t ask her to try again.”

“Pathetic. Everyone in your family is such a waste.”

“Don’t say that around Farah. She’s part of my family.” He stroked her head, glad she was too young to really comprehend the meaning behind her mother’s words.

“Luckily I spend more time with her than you do or she’d end up just like you.”

Before he could formulate a response, a growl rumbled from the side. Bastian gripped Farah tighter.

“I thought you said you killed it. You can’t do anything right, can you?”

“Shh!” he said.

“You’re such a failure, Bastian. You always were. The day I pulled your ribbon I knew.” She fell silent. Except for a faint gurgling sound.

A thump on the ground was followed by the grating sound of teeth tearing flesh and gnawing on bone.

Bastian stayed silent as he crept away into the forest, still holding Farah tight in his arms, letting the beast he thought he’d killed devour the wife he’d never wanted.

Bastian ran through the fog, not caring which direction he was running, as long as it was away from the beast. Farah clung to him, her tiny arms wrapped around his neck. Every few minutes he had to whisper to her to loosen her grasp. If she didn’t, they’d both be in trouble. He needed as much air as he could get.

“How long have you been out here?” he whispered in Farah’s ear.

She answered by sticking her thumb in her mouth. Bastian could hear the sucking sound knocking around his ear. He wasn’t too surprised she didn’t answer. She was more like him than Vinya would ever admit. Quiet and strong. Yes, his daughter was just like him.

When the muscles in his legs screamed at him to stop, Bastian slowed down. It was very different going through the fog without Tressa’s magic owl and its light. Before he could see all of the logs on the ground and the tree branches before they scratched his face. Now success was left up to chance. He refused to slow down and let that thing catch up to them.

It was injured, he knew that for sure. But it wasn’t bad enough to

leave them alone. It was still hungry. He wouldn't let it get his daughter.

"Have you seen Tressa?" he asked her.

Her little head shook no against his chest.

He sighed, but kept running. Tressa's father told him she'd left for the village. Maybe she'd already made it. He had to believe that. Anything else was too devastating.

Bastian tightened his arm around Farah, reminding himself there were things to live for. People to fight for. Lives worth saving.

From his viewpoint in the tree, he knew Hutton's Bridge lay at the center of the fog. If he kept running in a straight line he'd either come out in the village or outside the fog. Either was better than staying inside with the beast.

After an indeterminable stretch of hours, Bastian's lungs began to burn. He gasped for air, swallowing the thick blanket of fog. He stumbled, his feet too tired to go on. Sinking down to a soft patch of grass, he set his daughter on his lap, refusing to let go of her. He couldn't lose her too.

"Dada?"

"Shh." He didn't know how fast the beast could run. Maybe it had already outrun them. Maybe it was hiding just around the next tree. Without knowing, he had to remind her to be quiet.

"Keep walking, Dada." She crawled out of his lap and tugged on his hand. "Home."

She was right. They couldn't stay. Bastian moved to his knees. The pain in his leg from the puncture wound seared through his body. He couldn't go on. Not without water. Or rest.

He let his hand slip out of Farah's. The ground crunched as she tiptoed away. Bastian slipped to the ground and closed his eyes.

Chapter 31

Tressa stumbled into the first inn on the edge of town. The Rooster's Wattle. It would do. She pushed open the door and was greeted by the warm scent of freshly baked bread and porridge cooking in a pot in the hearth.

The innkeeper stood behind the bar, wiping it down with the edge of his apron. "Need a room, lass?"

"No, sir. A job, if you please." Tressa cast her eyes toward the dirty floor. Bowls still sat on the table from the meal the night before. Yes, they needed help, as she'd hoped. The outside was in disrepair too. They didn't have much, but she was willing to work for cheap. Any innkeeper would find that attractive.

"Why should I hire you? Where is your family?"

Tressa sighed and rubbed the side of her neck. "My father cast me out only a few moments ago."

The innkeeper's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Tressa pulled back the hem of her gown to reveal the love bite Bastian had left. "He accused me of being a trollop." She looked up, eyelashes fluttering. "It was only a small dalliance with a soldier." She tugged on her hair. A giggle passed over her lips. It felt forced, but the innkeeper wasn't focused on her laugh once she'd exposed her cleavage.

"I could use some help around here. It would help business to have an attractive young maid serving the men who stopped in. Are you against showing a little skin?"

"Will I get more tips?" She flashed him a brilliant smile.

He laughed. "It's almost guaranteed."

"And will I have a place to sleep?"

His eyes darted to her chest again. She knew what he wanted. He reminded her too much of Udor. Luckily she knew exactly how to manipulate him.

"Yes..." his voice trailed off.

Tressa held up a hand. "My own bed in my own room?"

He blinked twice, then looked her at her face, as if he just realized she had one. "Yes, of course. There's a small chamber at the back on

the third floor. It's nothing fancy. Just a bed and a chest, but it'll do for you."

Tressa curtsied. Her knees knocked together under her dress, but she hoped he didn't notice.

"Off with you, now. Put your bag in your room, then report back here. The crowd will be arriving soon to break their fast."

Tressa nodded. "I'll be out quickly to help you clean up for the morning meal."

Before he could answer, Tressa sashayed through the inn. They were all built on the same plan as the former inns back in Hutton's Bridge that now held multiple families. A kitchen, a bar, a dining area, and a room in the back for the innkeeper. The inn could build up, with three to four rooms on each level. This one only stood three levels. She'd seen some closer to the center of town upwards of seven levels built around the trees in the forest. Based on the pitch of the walls, those looked less secure than this humble establishment.

On the rickety steps, Tressa pulled the top of her shirt into a more respectable position. Making her way down the dark hall, the second-to-last door stood open.

"Who are you? Has he replaced me already? I'm not dead, despite what he told you." The voice came from the room with the open door.

Tressa hesitated, her hand on the latch of her door. "Excuse me?" she called back.

"Come in, child. Show me your face."

Tressa stepped away from her room and pushed the door to the other room open, finding an overweight woman lying in bed. Only a thin blanket covered her body, beads of sweat dripping down her cheeks and over her dark, but thin, mustache.

"Who are you? Proper girls don't travel alone. Particularly not ones as young and beautiful as you. A man might take advantage."

"No, my lady. I was running an errand for my father when your husband rushed outside begging for someone to come in and save his dear wife, who he loves so much, from the drudgery of kitchen work."

She snorted, her nostrils flaring. "Lies." Then she chuckled. "I like you already. You're not dumb, so you won't let him grope you. That's good enough. Come in, come in. I'm not as ill as everyone thinks. I'm just fat. And hot. I like to lay in bed."

"Then we're both in luck because I'm here to work."

"I suppose that boob out there saw your boobs and hired you on the spot."

Tressa laughed. "That's nearly how it went. If I promise to never let him touch me, will you agree to me working here for a time?"

"If it means I can continue to lay here, absolutely. Though should Ira pinch your arse once in a while, I won't throw you out." She

shifted in the bed, sitting up a bit. "Don't come too close or I might pinch it myself. I remember when I was your age. The young maids who hid in groves together and giggled over boys. I might have taken advantage once or twice myself, playing the role of the man, while teaching them how to kiss. A little touch here, a little grope there. It was all part of the game."

Tressa raised an eyebrow. She knew only one man who was interested in men, but it was a closely guarded secret in her village. He feared he'd be stoned and kept his feelings to himself. Apparently people in this town weren't afraid to discuss such things.

"Then I'll be sure to keep my bum away from you both."

The woman laughed. "I do like you. Welcome. What's your name, dear?"

Tressa had thought of everything, except a name. She took the first that came to her. "Sophia." Her Granna would be proud of her. After all, she was doing exactly what she'd been asked to do. Escape the village, leave the fog, and change the world.

The woman's nostrils flared again. "Do you smell that?"

Tressa leapt to the door. "Fire!"

Chapter 32

Smoke billowed in the hallway. She pulled her cloak over her mouth and nose, breathing slowly.

A flurry of curse words permeated the smoke.

“You’re a damn fine cook, Ira. I can always expect a surprise at your inn.” A rough voice said, followed by an unworried guffaw.

The smoke cleared out as quickly as it started. Ira stood over a deep pot sitting in the hearth. His shoulders hunched so far forward his neck seemed to disappear into his shirt.

“You, over here.” Ira pointed to Tressa.

She curtsied, letting her blouse dip low. Out of the corner of her eyes, she took a quick glance at the new man in the room. Well dressed, clean, and coin jingling in a pouch hanging from his hip. Repressing a smile, she quickly righted herself and made her way over to the hearth. He was exactly the type of man she’d hoped would walk into the inn. How fortunate he showed up her first day. She needed a man who could get her near the queen. If she ever held court, Tressa might be able to get close enough to kill her, ending the fog that held her people captive.

“Of course, milord.” She pretended acquiescence to Ira.

“Milord?” the stranger asked.

Tressa bent over the pot, pretending not to hear the man walking closer to her. His boots, heavy on the wood plank floor kicked up the dirt that so badly needed sweeping.

“I’m sure he doesn’t pay you enough to warrant a title like that.” The man stepped closer to her, close enough for Tressa to feel his breath on the back of her neck.

Tressa let her hip slide a little to the side, giving him a better view of what she had to offer. His breathing paused for a moment and she stood up slowly, turning to face him. She held back her loathing for the part she played. “It’s the tips from patrons like yourself that keep me from starving.”

He laughed again. “Silly girl. You’re just like all the others. I had hoped Ira finally hired a smart girl. It appears he’s only interested in a girl who plies the tricks of a whore to make her money.”

Tressa slapped him. His hand flew to his pink cheek, her handprint still visible in white. "You may be right, but you didn't need to say it out loud like that," she whispered.

The man's eyes narrowed. "No, I don't buy it at all. You're playing the trollop, and it's a part you don't play well. You're not an actress or a whore. So what are you?"

"None of your business. And I suggest you leave before I hurt you worse than I just did." Tressa didn't know anything about fighting. She'd have to continue to bluff her way through the conversation until he left her alone. Maybe he'd never come back to the inn. Another man would be better.

"Is she taking care of you, Leo?" Ira sidled back over to them.

"Yes, brother, she's a pleasant conversationalist. You chose your new employee well." He stroked Tressa's cheek. "Perhaps she can show me her other talents later."

Tressa bit her lower lip, enduring his touch. So they were brothers. One dazzled by her cleavage, the other fooled by nothing. Leo's hand left her cheek as soon as Ira turned back to the bar. Strangely, she didn't feel threatened. Quite the opposite. It almost felt tender, fatherly.

"Who are you and why are you here?" Leo's freshly shaven head and goatee set him apart from the other men who were quietly making their way downstairs from a rough night of drinking and whoring. Their tousled hair was preceded by the stink of unwashed clothes and sweaty armpits.

"I'm but a maid, looking for employment." She kept to the ruse. There was no other choice. She'd get him to go away and focus on finding another man who might be able to help her.

"I don't buy that for a moment. Your hands aren't rough and there's no stoop to your back."

"I'm young and strong," she countered, still stirring, unsure how long she was supposed to do it. Ira hadn't given her any directions. If he had, she'd happily be serving the other men instead of getting raked over the coals by his brother.

"There's something different about you. Your accent is wrong. Your hair is too long. Your attitude is too forthright." He placed his hands on his hips. "I've travelled extensively, yet I cannot place you. Why is that?"

"Maybe because you're not as smart as you think you are." Tressa tapped the spoon on the edge of the cauldron. "If you'll excuse me, I need to attend to my duties."

Leo clamped a hand around her bicep. "I will be watching you and I'll figure out why you're here." He lowered his voice. "But I must warn you. If you're new to town, you must be told. Stay away from

the soldiers. They'll take a woman like you and break her mentally and physically. Don't become one of their slaves, chouchou."

"Chouchou?"

"Term of endearment." He shrugged and smiled. "You seem a nice girl."

Tressa laughed, despite herself. "You don't know anything about me."

"True. But sometimes we project more than we realize."

"I don't know what you mean, milord." She shoved past him. All of her plans, so hastily made in the middle of the night came crashing down around her. Avenging Connor, getting close enough to Stacia to kill her, then saving her people.

Now with the morning sun streaming in, waking up her exhausted mind, she wondered if she made a mistake. This was going to be harder than she thought.

"Over here, girl." Ira called out. She maneuvered around the tables, the men settling in. A few pats on her bottom from errant hands didn't stop her.

Ira set bowls on the bar. "Take these to the hearth. Fill them up with porridge and take one to each of the men. I'll divvy up the bread." He tossed her a towel. "Make sure you use the towel when the bowls are full or you'll burn your hands."

* * *

BY THE TIME the breakfast crowd filtered out, it was time to prepare for lunch. When that was done, Tressa was given a break, which she spent gossiping with Ira's wife. Ira stayed far away. His wife seemed to scare him.

During supper, the front door opened with a flourish.

A hooded man stepped in, his cape fluttering behind him in the breeze. The patrons began to clap, peppered with much hooting and hollering. Long curly black hair peeked out from the edges of the rough woolen hood. A scent of cinnamon and thyme wafted past Tressa as he rushed to the stage in the back.

He slipped a rapier out from under his cloak. The room fell silent. "Who will challenge me?"

Tressa stared at him, unsure if it was a ruse or a true challenge. The men in the inn first treated him like a friend, then they were watchful. It didn't make any sense to Tressa.

Another man stood up from a nearby table. "I accept your challenge!" He pulled a sword from his hip, flourishing it in the air.

The two men parried. Tressa leaned against the bar, watching them whirl around each other, twisting and weaving around the

tables. The swords clanged and clashed. They slashed above the heads of the patrons. Strangely, no one seemed concerned they were in danger. In fact, within moments, they were cheering on the stranger and heckling the man who'd been sitting amongst them.

"It's a show," Ira drawled in her ear. "You looked concerned."

"Oh, I knew that it was an act." Tressa didn't, but there was no point in appearing naïve.

"He's a traveling performer. Works for tips. I'm lucky he showed up tonight. The men will drink more as long as he's here."

The faux battle continued on. When the first man became exhausted, another stepped up to take his place. The men seemed bent on besting the performer, but he never seemed to tire. He fought just as smoothly from the moment he'd stepped into the inn.

The action moved around the bar until they were dangerously close to Tressa. The hooded man grabbed Tressa around the waist, pulling her close to him. He leaned over and whispered, "I know you're hiding from something. I can teach you how to hide in plain sight, chouchou." Then he planted a big, wet kiss on her cheek.

The men cheered.

He let go, twirling her back to her post by the bar. She steadied herself. Nothing looked the same. Not his gait, nor his physique. Only his eyes, penetrating blue eyes sending her the truth over the heads of the men who were enthralled by the show. Leo. Ira's brother.

If it was true, and he could teach her to be someone new, she just might be able to accomplish her goals.

Chapter 33

“*B*astian?”

The voice sounded far away. He floated between awake and asleep, not sure which direction to go.

“Bastian?”

There it was again. The voice wouldn't quiet. He considered reaching up and choking the person until they left him alone, but he couldn't quite figure out how to lift his arm. Maybe he was restrained.

Who had captured him? Was he back in Stacia's clutches? And Tressa. Where was Tressa? Fear choked him.

He tried talking, needing to question the person in the room. His lips were frozen like a statue. His tongue slipped to the back of his throat. The words came out in a strangled garble.

“Don't try to talk. It's okay. You're safe. Farah saved your life. She urged you on until the two of you made it through the fog into the village.”

Farah. The images blasted into Bastian's head as if a bubble had just been popped in his memory. She was safe. But Vinya was gone. Devoured.

He struggled against the thickness in his mouth, prohibiting him from speaking. The voice didn't mention Tressa. He needed to know if she'd made it back to the village too. Her safety mattered as much as his.

His tongue moved. Another mangled query.

“Shh. Farah is safe. She's staying with the neighbors. Everyone is thrilled you're home. You're a legend. The first to ever make it back. I'm almost afraid to ask, but everyone wants to know what happened to Connor and Tressa.”

His heart sank. Tressa hadn't made it back, then. She'd failed or she was still out there with that thing that ate Vinya. In his mind, Bastian punched a wall. His emotions raged in his chest, slamming into his rib cage and tearing around his heart. Pain surged through his limbs.

“The cool water will bring you back. I know it probably hurts, Bastian. Just hang in there with me. You'll be okay.”

Fire burned across his skin. His muscles tightened up, refusing to unclench until he felt as if his entire body would implode. When he couldn't take one more second of the pain, his eyelids ripped open.

"Good for you! Keep working and pretty soon you'll be up and around."

Bastian's eyes searched the room and found a mop of red hair. Adam. He let out a sigh of relief. Now he knew for sure he wasn't tricked or being held captive. He was home. Without Tressa, but home.

His arms and legs still wouldn't follow his mind's commands. He needed to get up. Now. Had to get out there and find Tressa before the beast tricked her and took her from him. He couldn't lose both Connor and Tressa. The gods wouldn't allow that, would they?

Adam's hand rested on Bastian's arm. "Don't strain. It will all come back. I promise. You worked your body too hard. Your muscles will soften up, but you need rest." Adam held a cup to his lips. "Drink this and sleep. The worst is behind you."

Bastian tried to fight against the warm, fruity liquid meandering down his throat leaving a bitter flavor in its wake, but his tongue still wouldn't follow his commands. His thoughts wandered and he couldn't remember why he cared...

* * *

BASTIAN'S EYES POPPED OPEN. Darkness overwhelmed his vision except for a flicker of light in the distance. Pushing his palms onto the bed, he sat up. He felt tired, sore, but alive.

"Adam?" Bastian flexed his arms, his muscles responding with a pop. Good. Everything worked again.

A snore answered him.

Bastian slipped onto the floor, his bare feet mingling with the rushes. He stood for a moment, testing his strength. He jumped in place three times and circled his arms in the air. Nearly perfect. Only slightly slow. Adam was right. He would have it all back and soon.

He crept to his uncle. Sleeping in a chair, Adams' head was cocked to the side. Mouth open, framed by a fresh bit of spittle.

"Adam," Bastian yelled in his ear.

Adam jolted, his arms and legs flailing in every direction. Before he could slip out of the chair and onto the floor, Bastian grabbed his arm. "Son of a –"

"I'm awake," Bastian said.

Adam let out a nervous laugh. "I see that. Now if you'll excuse me while I go to my house and change my trousers."

Bastian's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." He

paused. "Well, not that much."

"I'm fine, I'm fine." He stood up and clapped Bastian on the shoulder. "I see you're doing well too. I'm glad I was right."

"Was there a doubt?" Bastian turned his neck side to side, loosening up.

Adam rubbed his hands together in front of the faint fire. "Until someone is up and walking around, there is always a doubt. I'm not a miracle worker. But you, my boy. You may as well have risen from the dead."

The unspoken hung in the air between them like a dark veil. There were two missing. One Bastian knew was dead. The other he couldn't say.

Adam rested an arm over his nephew's shoulder. "Do you know what happened to them?"

Bastian took a deep breath and sat down on the bed. "Connor is gone. Tressa... I don't know. Her father told me she'd entered the forest."

Adam held up a hand. "Her father? What?"

Bastian relayed the story to him. Adam's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he realized his sister was still alive and on the other side of the fog.

"So I followed Tressa into the forest. I couldn't find the spot she entered. No broken branches or trampled grass. Yet I have no reason to doubt her father. She's out there somewhere, Adam. I have to find her."

His uncle scratched his scruffy ginger beard. "And your wife? What of her? Farah brought you back, but her mother is still missing."

Bastian lay back down on the table, crossing his arms behind his head. "She's dead too. Eaten by the beast in the fog. Farah and I barely got away with our lives."

"You seem more concerned about Tressa than Vinya."

Bastian rolled his eyes. "I'm not happy Vinya is dead. But Tressa is, and always has been, the only one in my heart."

Adam coughed. "And as the resident physic, it is against my oath to speak ill of the dead. Perhaps we shouldn't speak of her again."

"Agreed."

"But in public..."

"I will mourn her. For the sake of our daughter only."

"A wise decision." Adam stood up and paced the small bedroom. "While I am concerned about Tressa's safety as well, for the gods' sake I loved her as if she was my own daughter, there are bigger problems here."

Bastian rolled to his side, fighting the urge to run back into the fog in search of Tressa. "How many people know I'm back?"

“Everyone. There’s already been a council meeting to address it. They plan to march out in the morning.”

Bastian bolted upright. “No. They can’t. They don’t know of the dangers or how to get out. They’ll all die.”

Adam nodded. “I told them as much. I urged them to wait until you were recovered. I assured them you would have knowledge they’d need to beat the fog.” He poured two cups of water and handed one to Bastian. “But they wouldn’t listen. The plague has elevated their haste. No one wants to be here anymore. People continue to die, three or four a day. We no longer hold public viewings. Despite the smell, the bodies are burned out behind the pasture. Our town is slowly dying and no one wants to be the last person standing.”

“I understand that, but death awaits them.” Bastian ran his fingers through his hair. “That beast is not the only enemy. I’ve met another.” He shuddered when he thought of the woman bound to the tree. He pounded his fist into his palm. “And there may be others. No one can leave unprepared.”

“What do you suggest?”

Bastian thought for a moment. He didn’t want any of his townspeople to die in the fog. He needed them to form an army. One that could find Tressa and one that could march against whoever trapped them in the fog. One that could stop Stacia from killing another innocent like Connor.

“We will train. In the shadow of death and plague, we will arm our men. They will learn to fight. We will train day and night until we are ready to march. No one else needs to die. Not under my watch.”

“You will have a hard time convincing the village of this. Their plan is to gather as much as we can carry and move into the fog like a group of wary refugees, taking our chances with the unknown to get away from the known danger of the plague.”

“Then they are fools.”

“I’m not arguing with you.”

“Tell me,” Bastian said, shifting carefully to avoid too much pain, “what happened to the dragon?”

“After you left, we took care of it.”

“Meaning?” Bastian’s head hurt, but he was desperate to know. Somehow it mattered to him.

“We skinned it. Divided up the meat. The residents of Hutton’s Bridge will feast on it for a long while.” Adam laughed and patted Bastian on the shoulder. “Lay down. Get a couple more hours of sleep. I promise I’ll have you up before they plan to leave. You can state your case then and hope a few are willing to listen to you.”

“Is there something in this water?” Bastian asked, his eyelids growing heavy.

“Of course. Now sleep, nephew. You need your strength for the dawn.”

Bastian drifted off, visions of Tressa lost in the fog racing through his mind.

Chapter 34

Bastian stepped out into the village center the next morning. A

crowd had gathered. Bedraggled children clutched the hands of their wary mothers. Men clutched garden implements, others held old weapons from the armory. They were preparing to walk into a massacre.

“Wait!” Bastian shoved his way through the crowd until he stood in the center. He stood on the slab where Sophia’s dead body had lain. “I’m the only one who’s gone out there,” Bastian pointed at the fog, “and come back. Well, other than my daughter, but she isn’t old enough to lead you. Will you listen to me?”

No one answered. Bastian wanted to scream. It was the same as the day he, Tressa, and Connor left. No one wanted to stand up for them. No one wanted the truth. He wondered for a moment why he even bothered.

Bastian looked out into their faces. The women huddled behind their husbands. The men didn’t know where to look, their eyes focused either on their toes or the sky. Pathetic. Every single one of them.

He pulled his sword out of the sheath on his hip. The metal glistened in the sunlight, except for the length of it stained by blood. There hadn’t been time to clean it. Just as well. Now they had proof of what awaited them in the mists.

“I lost someone I love in the fog. Do you want that to happen to your wives? Your children?”

Still no one made a sound.

Bastian refused to give up so easily. “I am the only one to ever make it back in the history of the fog. Do you think you will fare better? None of you were eager to volunteer when I chose to leave. Why are you so brave now?”

He waited, ready for a rebuke. Still, none came.

“All you’re doing is running from a plague. You’re trading one death for another.” Bastian sighed and sheathed his sword. He didn’t know how to make them see beyond their tiny understanding of the world.

“Even if you make it out of the fog, there’s an army out there, waiting to destroy us. They killed Connor. They will kill you too. Unless you learn to fight!”

“I want to learn!”

A child pushed his way through the crowd. Lukas. Geoff’s son.

“My mother and father died from the plague, but I didn’t. I’m strong. I want to fight.” The boy rested a fist on his hip. “I won’t be a coward like the rest of you. My Papa taught me to be brave. Didn’t yours?”

Bastian held back a laugh. Children always spoke the truth, especially when it was inconvenient for everyone else. He placed a hand on Lukas’ shoulder. “I accept your help, Lukas. Thank you for joining me.”

“You can’t fight with a child!”

Bastian couldn’t see which woman voiced her concern. It didn’t stop him from responding. “Why not? My daughter saved me out there. She’s younger than Lukas. Obviously the children do have something to contribute. Without her, I might have died. The beast would have torn me apart, just like it did Vinya and countless others from our village who were sent out over the years.

“If you want to escape Hutton’s Bridge and keep your lives intact, then give me time. Learn to fight.”

A man pushed his way through the crowd. Tom, the butcher. “How much time? People are dying here. The plague is spreading and we don’t know how to contain it. We could all die within weeks.”

“You will die if you go out there.” Bastian caught the man’s eyes. Neither of them looked away.

“You’re alive.”

“I was lucky. Please. Be patient. I will teach you what you need to know.”

Tom rubbed his temples. Bastian could see the exhaustion in his eyes. Drooping and bloodshot, Tom’s eyes carried a tale of hardship. The sheltered world of Hutton’s Bridge was slowly collapsing around them. There were no good solutions. Yet, Bastian wanted so badly to help them before they marched out to their deaths.

Children wouldn’t stand a chance against the beast. They’d mistake its call for their mother, wander off into the fog, and never return. Families would be ripped apart.

“Stay.” Bastian pleaded with them. He gripped Lukas’ shoulder even tighter. The boy’s strength fed his own conviction.

Whispers spread through the crowd. Finally. They were seeing Bastian’s pleading made sense.

“But if we stay, we will continue to be exposed to the disease.” A woman stepped forward. She clutched a child in her arms. “Even a

day can make the difference between life and death.” She moved in a slow circle, giving everyone a chance to see her face. “I vote we leave. Cowardice has kept us trapped here our whole lives.”

Bastian looked to Udor. He’d been oddly silent the whole time. When Bastian, Tressa, and Connor left, he’d been the most vocal. Now he didn’t utter a word.

“Udor, what do you think of all this?” Bastian asked. He knew he was taking a risk. The townspeople trusted Udor’s word, despite his selfish motives and lying heart. Few ever stood up to him.

Udor rubbed the tip of his gray beard. “I want to speak with you in private, Bastian. Will you allow us this?” he asked the crowd.

Knowing they really didn’t have a choice, the people parted, forming a path to the front door of the town hall. Bastian followed him in. Tressa had told him what took place in here right after her great grandmother died. Bastian’s fists trembled as he fought the urge to punch Udor.

Before the door could close all the way, Udor asked, “Where is Tressa?”

Bastian sighed and leaned up against the wooden wall. “I don’t know.” Lying wouldn’t do him any good. If Udor had any hand in helping him find Tressa, Bastian would give over his very life. “She entered the fog hours before I did. I didn’t find her in there.”

“And your wife?”

“Don’t you already know her fate?” Bastian had a hard time believing the news hadn’t made it to the leader of the town yet.

“I want to hear it from you.”

“She’s dead. Eaten by a beast.”

“Did you try to save her?”

Bastian sat down at the table. “As much as I could have tried. I couldn’t see her. When the beast attacked, I chose to save Farah instead.”

Udor nodded. “If it had been Tressa instead of Farah?”

Bastian wrung his hands together. “I’m glad I didn’t have to make that choice.”

“It’s as I suspected, then. You do love her.”

Bastian’s eyes narrowed. He stood up, letting the chair clatter to the floor. “That is none of your business.”

“But it is, especially if she feels the same about you.”

“I don’t speak for Tressa.” Bastian was growing more irritated by the second. Udor had no right to ask him such personal questions.

“Once you make them aware of the dangers in the fog, will you follow them in or stay here and wait for Tressa?”

“I’m heading back into the fog to find her.” Bastian hadn’t thought that far ahead yet. But he knew when he spoke the words that he

couldn't sit idly by in the village while others went out there. He had to find her and make sure she was safe.

Udor slapped Bastian on the back. "Then I will stay. So if she arrives here while you're out there, I can keep her safe for you."

Bastian knew the implied threat. Still, it didn't make sense. "Aren't you afraid of the plague?"

Udor paced the room. "I should be, shouldn't I? You haven't seen the dead. Did your uncle tell you how many have passed?"

Bastian shook his head. They hadn't had time to delve into the affairs of the village. He'd fallen asleep before he could learn much from Adam.

"About a dozen. It's not many, considering the size of our village, but it's enough to send people into a frenzy." Udor stopped in front of a window. With a finger, he pushed back the curtain. Bastian could see the people outside. They milled around aimlessly. Arguing. No clear leader or consensus among them. "It is always this way. There are too many of them who want out. The plague has only provided them with a good excuse to leave. It's what they want, you know. To leave."

"And you have never wanted to leave." Bastian knew the truth of it. Not once did he believe it a coincidence that Udor hadn't ever been chosen to enter the fog.

"I love this town. And you know now, just as well as I do, that there are things out there that want to kill us."

Bastian drummed his fingers on the table. "What things are you referring to?"

Udor rushed at Bastian and grabbed his red hair, scrunching it in his fingers like a wet cloth he wanted to wring dry. He twisted his wrist to the side. Bastian's neck yanked down, his ear nearly touching shoulder. "The dragons. They're coming."

"Let me go or I swear I'll drive your head into the wall and let it hang there like one of your trophies."

Udor released his grip. Bastian stretched his neck from one side to the other, loosening up his muscles. He wouldn't be caught unaware again.

"What do you mean, the dragons are coming?"

"You saw the one that landed here before you left. Have you seen more?" Udor's eyes were wide and dilated. Almost as if he had smoked the tall grass on the edge of the pasture.

Bastian thought of the claws raking across Connor's body as it disappeared into the door. Tressa swore it was a dragon like the one that had landed injured in Hutton's Bridge. He knew the truth, though. The woman in the tree had injured the dragon, forcing it to make an unexpected landing. Or maybe it had meant to penetrate

their town in the first place.

"No," Bastian said. It wasn't an outright lie. It had only been Tressa's opinion. He couldn't verify it then and certainly not now.

Udor hurried over to the enclosed bookcase where the village kept their most prized books. Riffing through the pages with a careful, but shaky, hand, Udor found the page he was looking for. His fat forefinger rested on a picture. He tapped it twice, uncaring that the gold leaf flaked off. "Dragon." He pointed outside where the beast had landed the day Bastian left. "Dragons. There are more."

Bastian knew there were. At least one. He hoped that was all.

"The history books tell of dragonlords. Men who ruled the dragons and therefore ruled the kingdom." He sat down in the nearest chair.

"Tell me more," Bastian said.

"Before the fog fell upon us, there were five dragonlords. One hailed from the north, two from the west, one to the south, and our own dragonlord on the Blue Throne. The peace was maintained until the Black Dragon in the south attacked his own people." The old man scratched his beard, picked out a nit, and flicked it to the floor. "The other dragonlords debated attacking. They met at the town nearest to all of their borders – Hutton's Bridge."

Bastian's eyebrows rose. He thought he'd heard all of the stories. Not this one. Not even a whisper.

"At the meeting, they decided to attack the Black. Show him that he couldn't hurt his own people without facing retribution. Hutton's Bridge was to be their main outpost for the war."

The old man pushed the book in front of Bastian. He didn't know how to read, but the pictures made it all obvious to him. "Why hasn't anyone ever talked about this?"

"Sophia was the only one who knew. We found this book hidden in her cottage after the three of you left."

"You went through Tressa's things?"

Udor sighed. "Bastian. No one ever comes back. The resources must be divided up amongst the rest of the villagers. It's never been any different. Why should we have suspected you'd show up half-dead last night?"

He wanted to insist that he, Tressa, and Connor were different. That everyone should have known they'd return. He knew the truth as well as anyone else. They weren't special. They were dead the moment they disappeared into the fog.

"If we leave and find a way to destroy the fog, it'll re-ignite a war, placing us right at the center. Is that what you want, Bastian?"

He didn't respond. He was too distracted by the image in the upper right corner.

Bastian puzzled over how to respond to the picture. He knew

exactly what the drawing represented. The woman in the tree. What he didn't know until that moment was that she wasn't alone. If the drawing could be believed, there were three of them placed at the edge of the fog. Their protectors or their captors? Bastian wasn't sure.

Even more disturbing was Sophia's involvement. How much did she know? What hadn't she told them?

"What else do you know?"

Udor shook his head. "The story ends there."

Bastian ran a finger along the inner spine of the book. "It doesn't end there. The pages are missing. Someone tore them out."

Udor grunted. "I'm sure it was Sophia. She was one of the few who could read. Carrac, myself, and only a couple of others. She was hiding something from us."

The door opened. Both Bastian and Udor tensed until they saw it was Carrac. The oldest person in the village since Sophia's death, he was also on the council of elders.

"He knows," Udor said with a wave of his hand. He filled Carrac in on what they'd been discussing.

"Sending people into the fog was her idea," Carrac reminded Udor. "She was trying to get people out."

Udor's fist slammed into the table. "Then why didn't she prepare anyone properly?"

"Excuse me," Bastian said, his eyes locked on Udor, "weren't you just trying to send people out there yourself?"

"As if I could stop them." Udor snorted and wiped his arm under his wet nostrils. "You think people here do as I say? Rubbish. They do as they please. They've lived in fear their whole lives, prisoners to this village. Guess what? None of them wanted to leave because it was idyllic. That damn Sophia used the fog to scare people into staying."

"It was rare someone volunteered," Carrac agreed. "They knew it was a death sentence."

Bastian had difficulty believing Sophia could have been so vindictive. She'd never seemed anything but adoring and honest. She

loved the village and her people.

"I've seen one of them." Bastian rested his finger on the woman to the southeast. In the picture she had flowing, long blond hair. Big blue eyes. Full lips. She looked nothing like the woman he'd seen. Yet he knew it was her. Who else could it be? Age and time and some form of magic had ravaged her body. Wrinkles as deep as an endless chasm. Her ample breasts wasted away until they resembled empty wineskins, drained of every last drop.

"You have?" Udor questioned him.

For the first time, they were allies. Bastian didn't like that one bit.

"Then you know how to defeat her?"

Bastian shook his head. "I don't. She uses magic to keep anything from making its way into the fog. She killed a bird and then tried to kill me."

"But you survived," Carrac said.

"I was lucky. In fact, my survival since I stepped through the fog has been nothing but sheer luck. I could have died many times over. My innards should be spread across the forest floor."

"You made it outside the fog, didn't you?" Udor asked. "Why haven't you told us any of that yet?"

"When have I had time?" Bastian retorted. "I just recovered over night. I came out this morning, begging for everyone to wait until I could spread word of what's awaiting them out there. No one wanted to listen. Don't get on me for not telling you everything."

Udor sank down onto the bench across the table from Bastian. Udor's eyes were bloodshot. Weary, even. "Then tell us your story. Don't leave anything out."

Carrac remained standing while Bastian relayed the events of the past few days. He told them as much as he could, leaving out the private liaisons between himself and Tressa. That was none of their business, even though he was quite sure Udor would have enjoyed a detailed retelling.

"Getting past the fog is only the start of our troubles," Carrac said. He stroked his long white beard.

"Which is why I vote we stay," Udor said. "If people want to go out there and get themselves killed, let them. Hutton's Bridge should stay as it is. Leave the guardians in their place. Someone put them there for a reason.

"To hide us," Bastian said.

"To protect us," Udor countered.

"Truth lies in perception," Carrac reminded them. "You," he pointed to Bastian, "want to conquer the world. To you this is a prison. You," he pointed to Udor, "are a content, fat, old man wanting to live out his days in peace. To you this is a haven."

Neither Bastian nor Udor replied.

“You both have salient points,” Carrac continued. “But you need to realize your perceptions are only a product of your desires and experience. Had Udor been the one to leave the fog, he might feel differently about staying.”

Udor snorted in response.

“Bastian, did you always want to leave the fog?” Carrac asked.

“Yes.” It wasn’t entirely true. Until Tressa had been forcibly pulled away from him, he’d had no interest in leaving the village. Once he realized his life wasn’t his, he wanted nothing more than to start a new life somewhere else. But it overshadowed the bulk of his adult life and those opinions were the ones that mattered most.

“Both of you need to realize Hutton’s Bridge is at a crossroads. Neither of you can stop change, but you both have the ability to influence it. This is your mantle of power. Wield it wisely.”

Bastian felt the responsibility heavy on his shoulders as if he’d put on a heavy fur in the dead of winter. “I’m not the right person to represent any course of action. I simply wanted to speak my truth and let others decide for themselves. I can’t speak with authority. That was Connor’s job.”

“Sometimes leadership is thrust on those who are not ready for it. Few choose the responsibility.” Carrac glanced at Udor. “Some steal it for no reason than to advance their own desires.”

“I love this town,” Udor insisted.

Carrac held up a hand. “I know you do. However, that hasn’t stopped you from manipulating everyone into agreeing with your thoughts.”

“Everyone but Sophia.” Bastian interrupted them. “She was the only vocal detractor of yours.”

“And look at what she’d been hiding from us.” Udor shoved the book at Bastian.

He rested a hand on the old leather, stopping it from ramming into his chest. “We don’t know why she had the book and it’s too late to ask her.”

“She died too soon.” Udor grumbled, wringing his bear-like hands together.

“Too soon? Was there a choice?” Bastian stared the man down. “Do you have a story to tell us too?”

Udor stood up and stalked over to the window. “Of course not.”

Bastian leapt from the bench, grabbing Udor’s furry collar in his hand. “Do you have a story to tell us too?” He twisted his wrist, bringing Udor closer. Their noses were only inches apart, but this time Bastian had the upper hand.

“Now, now,” Carrac said, “Udor had nothing to do with Sophia’s

death. 'Twas a plague that killed her. It's killing people in town. That is out of Udor's hands."

Bastian yanked Udor even closer. Their breath mingled. Udor's moist and rank, Bastian's hot and angry. "If I ever find out you did something to hurt Sophia, I will kill you."

"You're just a boy. You couldn't kill a fly." Udor's words were brave, but the wavering in his tone told Bastian they were uncertain.

Bastian let him go. Udor shrugged and stood up straight.

"The blood on my blade is not my own." Bastian unsheathed his sword. "Did you see it when I displayed it outside? Perhaps not. Maybe you'd like to examine it now?" He held it out for Udor to see, the tip only a hair's breadth away from the delicate skin of Udor's neck.

"Stop threatening me, boy. I have allies here who wouldn't hesitate to kill you."

Bastian's upper lip curled and he bared his teeth. "After what I've seen, I fear no man. Let them try."

Chapter 36

“*R*eady for your first lesson?”

Leo bowed with a flourish. He was back to the way he'd been when Tressa first met him a few days ago. Bald, goatee, totally recognizable. Yet somehow he'd completely disguised himself the other night.

If he wouldn't have called her chouchou, she wouldn't have thought him the same man. So tall and proud now. Unlike when his back hunched over and his eyes glinted with terrible malice from within his hood.

Tressa reached up and touched his goatee. “How did you make it disappear? I'm quite sure you can't grow hair that fast.”

He strode around the area in back Ira kept for garbage. They'd cleared it out the day before when he promised to teach her. The only stipulation was that her schooling would be done in private. No one knew his identity. He was known far and wide as The Entertainer. Some places he was The Swordsman. Others, The Man of Stealth and Romance. Tressa had giggled at that one.

She hadn't felt so safe around a man since Adam. It was the way she wanted to feel around her father.

For only a moment her heart twinged. She hadn't just left Bastian behind. She'd also abandoned the man who'd abandoned her. She just hadn't counted on missing her father so much.

“Perhaps you noticed my face was darker inside the hood?”

Tressa nodded.

“Makeup. Mostly soot. I ground it into my goatee, making it blend in with the rest of my face. Look closely.” He gestured toward his chin.

Tressa squinted, not sure what she was supposed to be seeing.

“I keep it short. So short that it's easy to hide. If I were to grow a long one like my brother, I wouldn't be able to transform so easily. Not only does it provide me the protection of anonymity when I'm not in costume, it also makes it quite easy for me to shave if I need to escape a town quickly.

“Why would you need to escape? You're an entertainer.”

“And you’re a barmaid. I think there are secrets neither of us are willing to divulge.”

“Fair enough.” Tressa stroked her own chin.

“Are you prepared to learn to be a man?” He bowed, holding out one arm in front of him, palm up.

She fought the urge to place her hand on his, like she would have done otherwise. She’d been grilled in proper behavior her whole life. Granna was a lady and she swore Tressa would be one too. She always said that just because they were trapped in the fog it didn’t mean they had to devolve into heathens. Hutton’s Bridge was once a shining bastion of beauty. Granna hoped to the end that someday it would be that again. She never gave up the dream.

That was all about to change.

In The Rooster’s Wattle she’d overheard a conversation about an upcoming tournament. The twelve winners would become the new elite guard for Stacia. Tressa was determined to learn to fight in time and Leo could teach her.

“I’m not sure I could pass for a man.” Tressa glanced down at her chest. She wasn’t too large, but not too small either. A perfect handful, Bastian always told her.

Leo waved a hand in the air. “If I can pass for a woman, you can pass for a man. You think I have a few extra pounds on me because I’m unhealthy? Wrong. All a man needs is a little belly fat. Push it up with the right girdles, and voila, boobs!” He grabbed his chest in his hands, squeezed tight, and pushed them up.

Tressa had to laugh. His boobs were now bigger than hers. “Fair enough! And all I need to become a man is to stick a codpiece in my breeches. I understand.”

Leo came closer, dropping his hands from his chest and his face becoming far more serious. He snaked an arm around her waist, pulling Tressa close. “Do you really think that’s all it takes to be a man?” His lips were only inches from hers. Her heart fluttered. Even though she wasn’t attracted to him, Leo took her breath away.

The back door from the inn opened. Ira peeked out and sighed. “I don’t even want to know.” He slammed the door shut.

Leo stuck his tongue out and winked at Tressa. “Not for you, my dear. You’re young enough to be my daughter. I prefer my lovers a bit more mature.” He let go and took a few steps away. “And poor Ira. I always got the girls when we were young. It’s just as well he thinks that again. It’ll give us a good reason to meet up and he’ll stay away from you.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s harmless.” Tressa practiced walking like a man, following Leo around their little, self-styled arena.

“Ira’s not even aware that I’m the man who entertained his inn the

other night. I spend more time here than the other inns, in an effort to help business. I don't think he knows, though. He doesn't pay as much attention to business as he should." Leo motioned to Tressa to continue practicing her swagger. "That's why I was glad to see you here. At first glance I could tell you cared. During our chat, I realized there was far more going on. You may have fooled Ira, but you won't fool anyone who is looking for ulterior motives."

Tressa dropped her posture. Would she ever be able to trick anyone? If she couldn't do it as herself, how could she disguised as a man?

"No one trusts anyone here, my dear, least of all the women, thanks to our dear queen Stacia." A shadow passed over his expression, flitting away as quickly as it had appeared.

If Tressa hadn't been studying him so carefully, it would have gone unnoticed. If the master of illusion couldn't control his negative emotions about the queen, then perhaps Tressa really had found an ally.

"This queen," Tressa imitated Leo as he bent at the waist, bowing low, "tell me about her."

Leo waved a finger in the air and shook his head. "Let's move on to another technique, shall we?"

"But, I –" Before Tressa could finish her sentence, Leo took her in his arms.

He bent her backward, his lips once again close to hers. "There are ears everywhere. Mention her name and they begin to listen."

Tressa nodded ever so slightly, trembling in his arms. Anyone passing by the back alley or looking out a window would see a couple in a tender embrace. They wouldn't see, or feel, the fear passing through her.

Tressa sat down on a nearby rock, the muscles in her arms sore and burning. She flexed one, impressed with the tone. It was amazing what a difference a month of hard training could do. She'd devoted everything to her mission, despite how much she longed to run back to Bastian. Knowing that killing Stacia would mean bringing down the fog forever and set her people free, Tressa was willing to risk a few lives to the plague to save the majority of them.

"Looking incredible, chouchou," Leo said, tossing her a wink. "Pretty soon you'll fool them all into thinking you're one of them."

She wiped the sweat from her brow, bringing herself back to the present. "How often does the Black Guard take on new soldiers?"

Leo brandished his sword. He stabbed her padded chest, prodding her until she stood up again. "Only once a year. On the summer solstice. The men compete in the games for a place in Stacia's elite guard. Even current members must compete to keep their place."

Tressa snorted. "So much for loyalty."

Leo danced around her, his feet sending the dirt into tiny whirling tornadoes. "It isn't about loyalty. It's about Stacia's safety." He looked at Tressa pointedly. "If you were the queen and you knew everyone hated you, wouldn't you only want the best surrounding you at every possible moment?"

Tressa nodded, breathing erratically. She couldn't keep up with his quick movements. There was no chance she'd ever make the guard and get close to the queen. "Why haven't you ever tried out?" she asked between puffs, her chest straining for air.

Leo stopped suddenly, pushing the tip of his sword into the ground. "Who's to say I haven't?"

She took the quiet moment as a chance to steal a breath. "You have?"

"I was a member of her highest guard for two years." Leo bowed his head. "I left of my own accord after I saw atrocities I could no longer support. Stacia is a cruel woman. Far crueler than her mother ever was. I grew up wanting nothing more than to serve her mother. By the time I was accepted into the guard, Stacia was coming of age.

Her mother let her handle more and more of the responsibilities. She behaved like the spoiled child she was. Men died on her whim.”

Tressa’s heart went out to him. She knew what it was like having her world torn apart because of others. It was why she was here. Why she was learning. Why she decided to take that moment to charge him.

Leo fell backward. Tressa landed on his chest. Straddling him, holding him down with the strength of her thighs, rendering Leo unable to move. He bucked, but she didn’t yield.

A smile graced his face. “Do this to another man and he might get the wrong impression.”

“Perhaps,” Tressa said, a smile on her face, “but you are not like other men. Besides, when I fight for my place in the Black Guard they will all think I am a man.”

“Even so, some men might be turned on by this from another man.”

Tressa rolled off of Leo and lay down on the ground next to him. “Are you one of those men?” Despite knowing it was none of her business, she was curious. In the last month, he hadn’t courted anyone – man or woman. Leo was strong and attractive. With a flick of his fingers, he could interest anyone.

Leo sobered up, the laughter that always accompanied his voice was silent. “Why?”

Tressa shrugged. “I don’t understand why you’re not coupled.”

“Why aren’t you?” he asked.

“You know why. I’ve told you about Bastian.” Her heart ached. She missed him so much. It would all be over soon, though. She was closer to achieving her goal. Confiding in Leo had helped soothe her pain. She’d told him only pieces of her life story. Enough for him to see her heart, but she never mentioned Hutton’s Bridge. Only a home she was forced to leave.

“I don’t care if you’re interested in men or women or sheep, Leo. I only want you to be loved and happy.”

He rolled on his side and poked Tressa on the nose. “I am. You bring me joy.”

Tressa rolled her eyes. “That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

“I have loved in the past,” Leo rubbed his goatee, “and I have lost. If I meet another whom I desire, I’ll act. Until then, it’s not worth discussing.”

A winged insect landed on Tressa’s hand. She held still, mastering her breath. Slow and steady. “Do you see it?” she whispered, not wanting to scare it away.

“It’s beautiful,” Leo said. “You know what they say about butterflies, don’t you?”

“This is a butterfly?” Tressa had heard of them from Granna, but they didn’t have any in Hutton’s Bridge. At least not alive. In the town hall, a few specimens were pinned to a board, kept safe from dust and the ravages of time by a thin layer of glass. She hadn’t ever imagined the stiff, thin wings could be so glorious once brought back to life. To her, they were ugly, the color faded from their wings, stiff as bones. “What do they say about them?”

“Some think they are the representation of a soul immediately following death.”

“That’s beautiful and morbid.”

Leo laughed quietly. “They also represent change, metamorphosis. I think it’s appropriate for one to visit you now.”

Tressa watched the winged creature as it took flight so effortlessly, gliding on the wind without another care in the world. She envied it. Her life had never been easy, but it had never been so hard as it was now. If her metamorphosis worked, she might have a chance at a normal life. If not, then a butterfly might visit her loved ones. Well, loved one. There was no one other than Bastian. Leo, yes, but he was a new friend. He’d move on without her. His life wouldn’t be disrupted. Bastian’s would. At least she hoped it would.

“How long until the summer solstice?” She’d lost track of the days since leaving Hutton’s Bridge. Time was no longer linear. It advanced in spurts and dragged on interminably on other days. Her job at the inn was a daily form of servitude. Patrons needed to be served every day of the week. There was no day for rest. All of her free time was spent with Leo.

Even Ira assumed she and Leo had coupled up. They kept up the ruse, knowing it was the only way they could justify spending so much time together. They’d also perfected the art of the fake embrace. At any given moment, Leo would grab Tressa and bury his face in hers. He never actually kissed her, or even showed any interest in doing so. His mastery of disguise extended to even the smallest nuance.

Tressa had seen people walk away from them, their faces red, obviously embarrassed at interrupting such a tender and intimate moment. Sometimes Tressa felt their guilt so deeply, even she blushed when Leo would release her. As if their public display of affection was something to be kept behind closed doors.

Leo stood up, brushing the dirt off of his jerkin. “You have only two weeks left, Tressa.”

Her heart pounded. Two weeks wasn’t enough. There would never be adequate time to prepare for this challenge.

“There’s something else I haven’t told you.” Leo hesitated, scratching his goatee.

Tressa sat up, resting her elbows on her knees. She didn't bother with the dirt, knowing she'd only be covered in it again soon enough. "What? Am I to defeat the dragon in battle too?"

Leo's fingers stayed on his face, rubbing the stubby hairs methodically in circles. "Sometimes men lose their lives trying to join the Black Guard. That wasn't the case when Stacia's mother ruled. She insisted on fair fights. Stacia, however, prefers to be surrounded by cutthroats and cheaters. These men are not only soldiers, they are murderers in her name. She not only tolerates it, she encourages it."

"I wish I could say I was surprised." Tressa rubbed her hands together. The blisters stung. She didn't ignore it. Instead, she internalized the pain, using it to fuel her fire for revenge. She flexed her arm just to remind herself how far she'd come. One-armed pushups were easy now. She could carry more and more at the inn. Leo had warned her against showing off. Drawing attention to herself and her strength was the opposite of what they were trying to accomplish.

"Are you prepared to kill?"

"Yes." She said it without hesitation or fear. She'd seen how easily they'd taken Connor away from her. They deserved what they had coming.

Leo held up his sword, motioning her to rise. Tressa stood, shook out her legs and fell into a ready stance, her sword pointed at an angle. He moved around her in a circle. Tressa didn't take her eyes off of him. She was cautious, knowing he was about to teach her a lesson. She'd learned to judge him quickly and his disguises no longer fooled her as they did others. He'd performed in the inn many times for the same men. It was always a different show and no one was the wiser that the same man stood in front of them night after night.

"Death is a finality you can never take back. If you make a mistake, your life ends. If your opponent makes a mistake, you have to choose whether to let him live to see another battle. You can also be the angel of mercy, taking a man's life after he's been injured so badly he can never recover." Leo struck her sword. Tressa parried. "The moment you point your sword at a man's throat or chest and know that you are the only thing standing between life and death can be humbling. It can also be empowering. That is when you learn who you are."

"I know who I am." Tressa slashed at Leo.

Leo moved in closer, forcing her arm toward her trunk, her sword at a peculiar angle. She couldn't fight him off without hurting him. Still, Leo didn't falter. His attacks became more frenzied. Tressa stumbled backward, lost her footing, and fell to the ground. One leg twisted under her, throbbing.

Leo lunged down, his sword stabbing relentlessly. Tressa fought back, trying to focus on the sharp tip of his blade and not the pain or discomfort of being sprawled awkwardly on the rocky ground.

"I get the point," she huffed between thrusts of her sword.

"No you don't," Leo growled. "Until you know what it's like to have your life threatened. Until you have to decide it's his life or yours. Until you have the moment where you tire of the game, find a weakness in your opponent, and end the fight forever. Until that moment you have no idea what it's like to stare death in the face, Tressa."

"How can I know until I'm there? I know you won't kill me." She fought to keep her voice low. It was imperative no one hear their conversations. Despite seeing them fight, for appearances sake they were both dressed as men, Tressa knew no one could discover their reasons.

"You can't." Leo pressed forward until she was flat on her back, his sword at her throat.

A trickle of blood dripped down the side of her neck. "You can stop now," she gasped.

"How do you know I'm not here at the queen's behest? How do you know she didn't have you followed? How do you know this all wasn't an elaborate set up, designed to test you. To see how far you'll go?"

He pushed his sword in a little harder, until Tressa could feel her skin slowly ripping apart, tearing into tiny shreds.

"Leo," she pleaded. She looked into his eyes. The gentleness she'd grown to love had turned to darkness. There was no more compassion. No understanding. Only the hardened gaze of a man who'd killed before and was considering doing so again.

She took one deep breath before he thrust his sword down all the way.

Chapter 38

Leo's sword wavered back and forth, stuck into the ground only a breath away from Tressa's throat.

"Give me your hand."

His fingers wiggled in front of Tressa's face. She lay on the dirt, refusing to touch him. Light danced in Leo's eyes, kicking the darkness away.

"Um..." Tressa's hand went to her neck instead. Warm blood pooled where he'd scratched her with the tip of his sword, only moments before she honestly believed he'd kill her.

Leo stood up straight, his hands on his hips. "Well, if you were in the arena, you would have died. I was only trying to illustrate a point."

"You did it quite well. I lost faith in you."

Leo turned around, pacing. "I'm sorry for that. It's a good lesson for you to learn. You can't trust anyone. Not your closest friend. Not your lover. No one. For the right price, anyone will betray you."

"Is that why you're always alone?" Tressa sat up, feeling like herself again. Willing to give the trust Leo had stolen.

"I'm with you now."

"But no one else. I'm new to your life."

Leo waved a hand in the air. "My life is that of a traveler. I can't have a home or a family. It's irrelevant."

"Aren't you afraid of dying alone?" Tressa's hand instinctively went to her stomach. She thought of the babies she couldn't conceive. The future she'd always thought would leave her alone. Now that she had reunited with Bastian, there was hope for the future. Maybe she wouldn't be alone forever.

"I will die when I die. I can't control it. I also can't control who's with me when it happens. All I hope for is an honorable death. Not something accidental or useless. I want to die for a reason."

Tressa wrapped her arms around Leo and rested her head on his shoulder. "I will tell your stories when you're gone."

Leo shrugged her off with a laugh. "The way you fight, you'll die long before me, chouchou."

Tressa laughed, even though she knew it was true. Especially after her performance a few minutes ago. She should have fought back. Kneed him in the crotch. Anything to set herself free. Instead she accepted her death sentence without even attempting to battle for her life.

Pathetic. She'd never make it. But she had no other choice. Going back to Bastian in defeat. No, she wouldn't make her sacrifice mean nothing. She'd do what she set out to do. Defeat Stacia. Avenge Connor. Set her people free. Only then could Bastian fully be hers.

The face of his little daughter interrupted her thoughts. She tried pushing it away, but Farah's tears poured into her dream. She was taking her father away from her.

Snap! Leo stood in front of her, his fingers together. "Wake up, chouchou. Practice is over."

"No." Tressa put a hand on his arm. "I must keep practicing until I'm ready."

"You will never be ready for what you will face."

"But –"

Leo laid his hand over her mouth. "Physically, you are ready. You are never ready mentally. Not even after you make your first kill."

"It doesn't get easier?"

"Never."

The sun had sunk below the buildings, bathing them in shadows. Night descended too quickly when they were practicing. "I have to get back to the inn for the evening meal. Ira needs me."

"I know. I'll make an appearance there tonight as well. What I did to you had to be done, but it weighs heavy on my heart. A girl like you shouldn't ever have to face an enemy like Stacia. You should be at home, with a man and children to love you."

"I never had a chance at a normal life. If I ever want to live life my way, it'll take freedom from tyranny."

"That's not a small order," Leo said as they walked back to the tavern. He stopped a few paces away from the bustling people headed out for an evening meal or back to their homes after a long day of work. "You never did tell me how you planned to stop Stacia once you joined the Black Guard."

Tressa looked at her feet. She didn't have an answer. That scared her more than fighting for her life in the arena.

Chapter 39

Swords clanged in the damp air. Bastian's crossed with Adam's, over and over again until their forearms ached. Adam dropped his to the ground and held his hands in the air.

"I'm done. For today, at least." Adam rubbed his hands up and down his arms. "I'm not sure if you're getting us ready for war or trying to systematically wear us down."

Bastian laughed. "You're stronger now than you were a few weeks ago."

"True. True. When do you think we'll be ready to head out?" Adam nodded at the fog.

Since the day Bastian argued with the townspeople, everyone had decided to stay. Those who could pick up a sword spent a couple of hours each day practicing. The rest of the time they packed. Deciding what to bring and what to leave was hard. They didn't know if they'd ever make it back into the village.

Bastian encouraged them to pack light. To only bring what was necessary. It didn't make it any easier. Adam had a rough time. As the only healer, he had a variety of tools and instruments at his disposal. But they were iron, and heavy. Bringing them could save someone's life, but he wasn't sure how to carry everything himself. Udor had promised him an apprentice. Yet no one had shown interest.

"In a few days," Bastian answered. "I don't want to wait too long or people might forget what we're training for. It's too easy to fall back into familiar patterns." He clapped his uncle on the back. "I'm glad you're training. It's important for you to be protected because we desperately need your skills out there. But if you should be attacked, you must be able to defend yourself."

Adam stretched out his arms, swinging them side-to-side. "I think I'll be ready for anything tossed at me."

Bastian sighed. "I don't want anyone to be cocky. None of you know what's out there. This village," Bastian looked around at the simple homes, "is nothing like what's out there." He walked ahead, Adam next to him. "The buildings are made out of the same materials, but the people are far more ruthless and dangerous. They make

Hutton's Bridge look like it's populated by simpletons."

"Bastian!" Kaima ran toward him, her skirts lifted up to her ankles to keep her from tripping over herself. "We need your help. Over here! Yours too, Adam."

The men took off running after Kaima. A howl of pain came from the back of the town hall.

"Hurry," Kaima yelled over her shoulder.

Two men struggled behind a building, their arms wound around each other. A child lay on the ground, covered in blood.

"Get away from him."

Bastian wrested the two men apart, pulling on their arms until they let go.

"He tried to kill my nephew!" Tom, the butcher, yelled.

Bastian looked down to the ground, where the young boy, Lukas, lay holding his arm.

"The boy wanted to train. I was only helping him out. It was an accident." James, a farmer, screamed back.

"Both of you, back off," Adam ordered through gritted teeth. He tore off a strip of his shirt and placed it on the boy's arm, staunching the wound. Blood bubbled on the side, then slowed to a trickle. "Someone could have taken the time to stop his bleeding instead of fighting about it."

The two men looked sheepish, their eyes toward the ground.

"Look," Bastian said, placing his arms around the shoulders of the two men, "you must learn to control your anger. If you don't, innocents will die. Focus solely on the enemy."

"He shouldn't have been fighting with my nephew," Tom insisted.

"Why not? It's possible he'll be in as much danger as the rest of us. It won't hurt him to learn some combat techniques," Bastian said.

Lukas puffed up his chest.

"But you should know better than to strike a child," Bastian said. "Control. That's the one thing everyone needs to focus on. Not the strength behind the swing of your sword. Not the angle of the sword's entry. All of that comes together if you have control."

Bastian dropped his arms and stood in front of both men. "You're going to need it out there." He pointed toward the fog. "What's out there will test your mettle. It will push you to the breaking point. It will force you to choose between life and death, between love and pity. You will be tested. And you will be changed."

He turned his back on the two men, done with them. They wouldn't listen. He knew that. Until they saw it for themselves, their closed minds wouldn't accept anything Bastian said. The only credibility he had came from his return. He was the only one. Ever. It held some weight, but stories couldn't even outweigh experience.

"How is he?" Bastian dropped to one knee next to Lukas.

"He'll survive," Adam said. He helped the boy sit up and prop his back against the side of the meeting hall. "But he won't be able to lift a sword. Maybe not even a pack."

Tears streamed down the boy's cheeks. He wiped them away angrily with his sleeve, leaving a streak of blood on his face. "I only wanted to learn. I want to fight."

"Lukas, I am proud of you for wanting to fight. But the children aren't going to come with us into the fog."

Lukas nodded. The tears slowed. "But if something comes here again, another dragon or a beast, like the one you've warned us about, I want to be able to fight!"

Lukas' eyes were wide, full of hope. At the same time, they were fierce, willing to fight. Bastian recognized that. He'd seen it in his own eyes. "I need someone to protect my daughter. Not a grown man. As you can see, their petty disagreements get in the way of what's important," Bastian said.

The boy took a quick glance at his uncle.

"What I need is someone who will be with her all the time. Make sure she's safe. Maybe even hold her hand. Can you do that?"

"Hold hands with a girl?" Lukas' nose crinkled at the thought.

"I'd consider it a great favor if you'd help me. I can't fight if I'm worried about her. If I know she's with you, I'll feel much better."

Lukas' back straightened. He sat up a little taller. "I'll do it, sir."

"Bastian. Not sir. I've done nothing to deserve that title." Bastian ruffled Lukas' sandy hair. "Now head home with your uncle. Tell your aunt what happened and how you've been rewarded for your bravery."

Lukas stood up, a little shaky. Tom placed his hand on his nephew's uninjured arm.

"I am sorry," James said.

"It's okay," Bastian said. Everyone knew he didn't mean it, though. He'd said it for Lukas' benefit. "Control yourself and we won't have to have another discussion."

The men, Lukas, and Kaima walked away in silence. After only a few steps, they split up, heading back to their respective homes.

Bastian let out a long sigh and ran his hands through his hair.

"No one ever said this would be easy," Adam said. He wiped his hands on his shirt, smearing blood all over the light fabric. "I'd better get home and wash up. Do a little laundry too."

Bastian laughed at his uncle covered in red hair, red freckles, and red blood. "I know, I know. I meant what I said, though. Until they actually see what it's like out there, they can't understand."

Adam nodded. "It's like having a cold bucket of water dropped on you after a long night of drinking. Very sobering."

"Yes." Bastian looked out at the misty forest, wondering if the beast was lurking just at the edge of the fog, awaiting his return. Soon enough they'd meet again, and this time Bastian was prepared to kill it.

Bastian pulled off his shirt and settled into bed as the sun set.

He was already missing the freedom of the life he'd tasted outside of Hutton's Bridge. He thought of the sunset he and Tressa had seen as they made love in the grass. He felt a familiar throbbing. He groaned, wishing she was there with him. Their reunion had been too short.

Adam only questioned his haste to get the army ready once. He'd asked if Bastian was hurrying them along only so he could find Tressa. Without hesitation, he'd admitted that was his plan. He knew going into the fog would be fruitless. If the map Udor showed him was to be believed, then Tressa could be walking in circles. If Bastian hadn't thought to climb the trees, he wouldn't have known to go straight through.

But without knowing where she was, diving into the fog without a plan was a waste of time. He needed an army. Not just to fight the beast or protect themselves once they found their way through fog. No, he needed them to be able to fight the people in the trees. The guardians.

He'd seen enough to know the woman was dangerous. It was likely the other two were just as lethal. If he could destroy them, then the fog would disappear. Only then could he find Tressa.

If she was still alive.

He couldn't even stand to think of her body laying dead, or consumed by the beast wandering in the forest. She wasn't stupid. She'd figure something out. Tressa always did.

A knock on his door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in," he said. Before he could stand and pull his shirt on, a young woman walked in. She held a shawl tightly around her chest, her hands trembling.

"My mother asked me to see if you needed attending. Your wife is dead and you've been injured. I'd be pleased to help you." She dropped her shawl to the floor, revealing a loosely tied chemise and breasts straining to be let free.

Months ago, Bastian would have been tempted. He wouldn't have hesitated to pull the string, letting her blouse fall open, so he could

fondle her breasts. His life with Vinya was unfulfilling, sexless, and depressing. Any time a woman wanted a dalliance in the back of the forge, he was willing to oblige. It was his way of drowning out the fact he couldn't have the woman he wanted and was stuck with one he didn't. He let the other girls dress the wounds in his heart with tongues, nipples, and gasps of pleasure, despite unsanctioned coupling being against their laws.

She stood in front of him, her breasts heaving. In the past it was a turn on. Now Bastian saw it only as desperation.

"If I send you home, will your mother be angry?" Bastian bent over, picked up her shawl, and held it out to the trembling girl.

She nodded. Taking the shawl from him with shaking hands, she wrapped it back around her shoulders, tighter than it was when she'd walked in. Her mother had probably forced her to loosen it up. Before he stepped into the fog, Bastian was the bad boy none of their mothers wanted their daughters around. Now, as something of a hero, he'd been elevated to the man who mothers wanted to sell their daughters to.

It was unfortunate he'd changed or the night ahead would have been far more interesting.

"Take my bed." He gestured to the rumpled mess of sheets. "I'll sleep on the floor. In the morning, you can tell your mother whatever you'd like."

The girl nodded, and scurried to the bed without saying a word. She sat down, unsure what to do next.

"Do you have a name?" he asked her, finding it ironic he was getting to know more people in his village since he'd come back than he had before leaving.

"Christa." It came out as a whisper.

"You can lay down, Christa. There aren't any bugs in my bed."

A smile crossed her lips, but quickly fell away. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Bastian said. He settled into an upholstered chair. Over the years it had been patched many times. The damask fabric had once been luxurious and rare. Bastian's grandparents were wealthy merchants before the town was trapped in fog.

"Did your wife really die out there because of some beast or did you kill her?" She covered her mouth and her shawl slipped down, revealing ample amounts of forbidden skin.

He tore his eyes away. "I didn't kill her." Bastian stood up and paced around the small room. "Is that what they're saying?"

"A few. My mother didn't believe it. It's why she sent me here. She said if she believed the rumors, then she would have kept me home."

"And why, exactly, did she send you here?"

Christa's cheeks grew pink splotches. "To see if you needed a nurse for your daughter."

Bastian raised an eyebrow. "Not to seduce me?"

"Maybe. Only if you found me pleasing." She shifted on the bed, leaving room for Bastian. "Do I please you?" She dropped the shawl again and began untying the remainder of her laces. Eyelashes fluttered as she looked up at Bastian with deep brown eyes.

He fought his instincts as her breasts spilled out of her top.

"Is this what you want, Christa?" Bastian forced his eyes to look at hers and not one bit lower. "If you pulled my ribbon at the next ceremony, would you be happy?"

"Of course. I'd be proud to be your mate. I know I could produce more heirs for you. A boy this time. I promise I'd give you more than Vinya ever did." She slipped her arms out of the sleeves and let the dress fall to her waist.

Bastian couldn't help but look at her. She was beautiful. So young and pure. He could teach her so much.

But she wasn't Tressa. Bastian shook his head. "Pull your dress up. I won't do this."

"It's too soon, I understand." Within moments she'd covered herself again.

But she didn't understand. None of them did. Just Adam. Only he knew how desperate he was to rescue Tressa. Maybe Udor, but he never understood love. To him, Tressa would have been a possession.

In the end, it would be better for none of them to know everything he was doing in Hutton's Bridge was for Tressa. He no longer cared if the villagers stayed in the fog or left it. As soon as he found Tressa, he'd turn his back on everything and everyone in the village.

"Dada." The voice as small as its owner pushed open the door.

"Farah." Bastian squatted and scooped the little girl up in his arms.

"Who that?" Farah pointed one fat finger at Christa, who thankfully, was fully clothed and presentable again.

"That's Christa. She came over to play with you and help you get off to sleep. Didn't you Christa?"

She stood up and curtsied. "Yes, I did." A smile spread across her face as she sat on the floor next to Farah. "Why are you still up, little one? Do you want me to tell you a bedtime story?"

Farah clapped her hands together and giggled. "Oh, yes! Momma no tell stories. I like stories!" She grabbed Christa's hand and pulled her back into her bedroom.

Bastian sank into his bed, relieved Christa was gone. If she'd gone too much farther, he might have had to leave the cottage and spend the night at Adam's. He was in love with Tressa, but he was a man too. He'd never been any good at saying no to a willing woman.

He let his thoughts drift to the night he and Tressa had reunited. He slipped one hand under the covers and let the memories overtake him. When he was done, he rolled over and fell into a sound sleep.

Chapter 41

Tressa woke before the dawn, sleeping only in fits and spurts through the night. She had to be up and ready for the competition to join the Black Guard before the sun lit the ground to the west. Leo told her to get good sleep and he'd make sure she was up early enough. She'd tried to follow his advice, but nerves got the best of her. The night was spent in a fitful sleep. Nightmares punctuated by real concerns. Images of her death. Blood. Severed limbs. Connor's face floated in and out of the haze, reminding her why she was going ahead with her foolish plan.

Or lack of a plan. She had nothing more than a vague idea of how she was going to get close to Stacia, much less kill her. The woman's braid and its deadly spikes shredded through every scene, ripping apart everyone in her dream.

Leo still slept in the bed across the room. His arm rested on top of his head. Tressa analyzed him, determining she could kill him with one strike of a sword under his arm. She shook her head and threw off the wool cover. It landed on the wooden floor without a sound.

She tiptoed over to Leo and reached out to touch his arm. He leapt up, grabbing her shoulders. Tressa stumbled backward, balanced only by the grip he had on her.

"You scared me!"

Leo chuckled. "You must be ready for everything."

"I thought you were asleep."

"Hardly. After listening to you moan in your sleep all night? I couldn't have slept even if I'd been awake for the previous five days." He tilted his head to the side. "Are you going to be okay today? You don't have to go through with this."

She spun out of his grasp. Every moment with him was a test. It was one she wasn't willing to fail. "Yes, I do." She slipped behind the screen, took off her bedclothes, and pulled her leather battle clothes on. Leo had purchased them for her from a local merchant with the money she'd earned working for Ira. A man could buy combat clothing without anyone batting an eyelash. Tressa would have been noticed. Talked about. It could have ended her plan before she had a

chance to place it into motion.

"What are you going to do today?" she asked Leo.

Silence was his answer.

"Leo?" She peeked her head about from behind the screen, but he was already gone.

After binding her chest, she finished dressing. Grabbing a sharp dagger, Tressa prepared herself for the final part of her preparation. She pulled her ponytail over her shoulder. Bit by bit she sawed it off.

Her hair fell onto a cloth she'd placed on the table. There couldn't be one strand left to identify her. As far as Ira would know, she'd run off with Leo.

She set down the dagger and purposefully avoided looking at the warped mirror on the wall. She didn't want to see herself. Tressa wrapped up the towel and tied the edges together. Holding it upside down, she gave it a shake. No hair fell out. Perfect. She stuffed it in the bottom of her pack. She'd discard it later in the forest. If she survived the day.

She looked again at Leo's bed. Trying not to be disappointed he'd left without saying goodbye, Tressa tossed her pillow on his bed. It was something they'd done every morning since taking the room together. Leo was all about illusion and trickery. He'd known Ira would snoop. When he found their pillows together, their story was confirmed. Every so often Leo would pluck strands of Tressa's hair and scatter them on the bed. It only took a few details to make the illusion complete.

Her pack sat on the table, waiting for her to fill it with the few belongings she had. A dress. A brush. A few scraps of food she'd stolen from Ira last night. Enough to get her through the fight. After that, she'd be on her own. Leo had shown her a hollowed out tree just outside the village. The hole was hidden by thick branches. He'd been using it on and off for years and never been discovered. That was where she'd hide her bag until she could pick it up again.

After she killed Stacia.

Just before she'd make her way back to Bastian.

Her stomach flipped. Bastian. Would he ever forgive her for leaving him behind? She hoped he would. Bringing Connor's killer to justice would go a long way toward earning that forgiveness. Tressa took a final look around the room that had been her home for the last month. She was leaving nothing behind. Never returning. No regrets.

She fingered the note Leo left for Ira. It was short and sweet.

Ira,

I'm in love with your barmaid, Sophia. We're off to be married. We'll be in touch with you.

*Your brother,
Leo*

AFTER HIDING the pack in Leo's secret spot, Tressa took a deep breath. Her shoulders pulled back. Her tightly bound chest puffed up. She took on the swagger and confidence of a young man about to conquer everyone for a place in the Black Guard.

During the walk to the arena in the middle of the city hidden among the trees, Tressa tried not to engage anyone. Her mind was focused solely on the upcoming battle. Sword strapped to her hip. Shoulders flexible. Legs stretched and ready to dance with the other men. Heart prepared to kill.

Crowds milled around the arena, ready to watch the battle. Women wore armbands with their favorite contender's sigil. Pennants on the end of branches waved from the stands. Tressa didn't have any colors to bear. No family to represent. Leo had told her it wasn't uncommon. Peasants frequently entered the competition to improve their lot in life. Many died in the attempt. The winners usually bore the sigil of the wolf or lion, two families who trained their boys from birth to join the Black Guard. It gained them favor with the queen and elevated their status in society. They were almost impossible to defeat.

Tressa's strategy was to avoid them and fight the others like her. If she could beat them and make it to the end, she might be among the twelve chosen for the Black Guard. Leo hadn't only taught her to fight. He'd given her the strategies he'd implemented to join the Black Guard. His use of illusion and deception would be her saving grace. All she needed to do was stay alive.

Men waited in a long line leading up to the arena. Each was given a number, painted on their cheek in woad. Leo explained to her that the blue dye lasted longer than the red of madder and the yellow of weld. Based on the line, Tressa guessed her number would have two symbols to it. Granna had taught her to read text, but not numbers. To her, they were meaningless symbols. Still, she would wear hers with pride.

As the morning sun rose, the crowds grew thicker and louder. The line shortened and soon it was Tressa's turn.

A woman grabbed her arm, pulling her close. "You're a young one, aren't you?"

Tressa nodded. She'd vowed to talk as little as possible, for fear her voice would give her away.

The wet dye tickled as the woman drew on Tressa's cheek with her finger. "If you make it out alive, come see me afterward. I work at the White Swan. I'm giving away free, ten-minute sessions to competitors. Just a little perk for trying your best and surviving."

Tressa raised an eyebrow, but didn't say a word.

The woman tossed her a crooked smile. "Ah, you're a virgin, aren't you? Don't worry, Sheleigh will take good care of you. She specializes in first times." She winked, then patted Tressa on the butt.

She stumbled ahead, berating herself for showing shock. Any young man would be thrilled with such a proposition. If she was going to pass for one, she'd have to play the part better. It didn't end with the battle. Getting into the Black Guard was only the beginning.

A horn sounded in the distance. The door that Connor's body disappeared into opened. Stacia stepped out, clad in the blue armor she'd worn the day Tressa, Bastian, and Connor met her outside the forest. Tressa wanted to elbow her way through the crowd of men, jump up on the stage, and kill Stacia in front of everyone. It would mean her death too, but the blood pounding in her veins didn't care.

Forcing slow breaths, Tressa reined her desires in. It had to be done the right way. Carefully. When they were alone. Tressa wanted to tell Stacia exactly why she was about to die right before she ran the sword through her black heart. Then she needed to escape and make it back to Bastian. Her love. Free her people from the fog once it was safe for them to come out.

The plan didn't involve a public killing or Tressa's death in kind. Despite the rage, she had to control herself and let things unfold. One victory at a time.

Tressa turned back to the other men, studying them. Some seemed confident, strutting around as if they'd already won. Others were unsure and one man stood off to the side crying, his mother next to him with her arms folded under her ample bosom, a frown on her face.

He was only a child. No more than twelve. Why would a mother force her son to compete at such a young age?

Then she saw it. The wolf on the fabric tied to his shoulder. So this was his lot in life. His birthright led him to this. Tressa wanted to walk over and hug him. Let him know he wasn't the only terrified competitor.

All of her urges went against what she was there to do. Her heart sank. Could she keep up the charade? Was there any chance she'd come out victorious?

Stacia raised her arms in the air. The crowd was immediately silenced.

"I see many fine men out there, all prepared to fight to the death to protect me, your queen. I bestow blessings on all of you." A cruel smile spread across her face. "And those of you cowards who are injured, if you wish your lives to be spared, you best leave the arena quickly. There will be no mercy today!"

“The rules are simple. The final twelve left standing inside the arena win. Everyone else can slink off in disgrace or die honorably in battle. It is your choice. Once you leave the inner ring, you cannot re-enter. Now, fight for your destiny!”

The horn blew louder, calling the men to the arena.

Swords whooshed out of their sheaths, clanging in the air. It didn't take long before men dropped to the ground, felled by a well-placed blade. One young man dragged himself across the dirt, clawing desperately to make it to the outer ring where he would be safe. Before his finger could cross the line, a man with a lion sigil pierced him in the side. Blood sprayed in the air. He took one final breath, then his head fell to the ground, his eyes blank. It was the boy with the wolf on his arm that Tressa had seen crying not long ago.

Tressa held back the bile rising in her throat. Leo had tried to tell her, but nothing could have prepared her for the raw carnage. She hunched down, blew her hair out of her eyes, and entered the fray.

Chapter 42

The battle raged on. With the sun at its highest, the scent of sweat permeated the arena. Tressa wiped her forehead with her arm. The point of her sword in the ground, she leaned against her weapon, taking a breather.

The main throng of fighting was taking place on the other side of the circle. She watched them spar as if they had limitless energy. Most of the participants remaining bore the lion or the wolf, their dark reds and oranges standing out in the mass of men and steel.

Tressa had managed to avoid most of them. She'd concentrated on injuring the weak and letting them make it to the outside of the circle. Her fighting techniques looked inept. Thanks to Leo's instruction in illusion, she didn't appear to offer a threat to anyone. Yet when she was near a wolf or lion, she fought with everything she had, proving to them that she deserved a second glance.

Leo had explained the goal was to pick off the weak first. Get them out of the ring so the real battle could take place. Even though every man wanted a spot on the guard, he also knew that his fellow victors had to be the best of the best. No one wanted a coward to slip through to the end because he avoided most of the fight.

It was a strategy that had produced a guard not only lethal, but clever. It was exactly what the queen wanted and they knew it. Pleasing her meant a life of boons... at least while still in the Black Guard. On this one day a year, no one was safe.

A man sauntered over to Tressa, his sword gleaming off the sun's rays.

"Taking a break, are you? I think I'll join you, if you don't mind." He huffed the words out between quick breaths.

He seemed winded, but Tressa wouldn't trust it for one second. She only nodded, grasping her sword tighter in her fist.

"Quite a day, isn't it?" He removed the leather hat from his head. "The men are going down faster than last year. I suspect the guard will be chosen by midday."

She didn't respond.

"You're a quiet one. What's your name?"

She glared at him, not taking her eyes off his arms. If he made a move, that would be the first place she'd see it. Muscle contractions couldn't be hidden.

He laughed, the braid on his long black beard danced from side to side. Yellow and red beads decorated the length of it. "I can tell this is your first time here." He coughed, phlegmy and thick. "You won't win."

He nodded to the throng of men fighting. "Twelve of the men left are from the last guard. They're all working together. I'm sure they planned their strategy ahead of time."

Tressa let her eyes wander to the group. She could see it now. They moved in unison, helping each other. One would strike the first blow, another would finish the man off. "They're conserving their energy." Her hand flew over her mouth. She hadn't even thought to disguise her voice.

She looked at the man. He didn't register a hint of surprise.

"If you want to win, you'll have to take out at least one of them." He didn't comment on her voice. Maybe he assumed she hadn't reached puberty yet. "The best way to do that is to get one to break off from the bunch. They're much less lethal alone than together. Not that they aren't great fighters alone, don't make that mistaken assumption, but it's easier to kill one at a time."

Tressa wanted to ask him why he was telling her all this. She didn't trust her voice. Discovery could mean instant death. Her mind reminded her of one of her dreams: her top torn open, her femininity discovered, dozens of men hacking her body to pieces for trying to fool them. No, she wouldn't say another word.

The man nudged her with his elbow. "Watch this." He ran off toward the fray, his sword waving in the air.

He jumped on the back of one of the wolves, forcing the man away from his comrades. They fell to ground. The braided man pushed off the ground, rolling away into an open area.

The wolf elbowed him in the stomach. The man grunted, then leapt to his feet, the blow not affecting him at all. He brandished his sword, sticking it into the wolf's heart. With a sucking sound, he withdrew it, along with a gush of blood. The wolf's eyes widened as he stumbled backward. He opened his mouth to scream, but instead of a cry for help more blood spurted from his lips. His knees buckled. His sword dropped to the ground. His body crumpled in a heap on the dirt.

The braided man picked up the wolf's sword in his left hand. With a flourish, he spun them from side to side in a blur of steel and vital fluids. "Got to clean the blood off," he yelled to Tressa. After a quick wink, he chose another victim.

Tressa decided she'd waited long enough. She walked the circle, looking for the right victim. The man with the braid wasn't it. Despite herself, she liked him. If she had to fight alongside someone, she'd choose him just as quickly as she'd choose Leo.

Twenty left. No, nineteen. It was shocking to her how quickly they fell. Exhaustion was setting in. She knew that as well. Her arms ached. Her legs burned like they were on fire. Her palms were covered in blisters, most of them already swollen and broken. She'd need a lot of ointment to stave off infection in the days ahead.

If she made it that far.

If she survived.

Before she could choose her next victim, someone chose her. With his sword in the air, his war cry echoed in the quiet afternoon. The crowd had gotten bigger, waiting for the time when there were only twelve left in the arena.

Tressa planted her feet on the dirt, squatted, and braced herself for the attack. As his sword came rushing down at her, she stepped back and parried. The clang of metal on metal was followed by the screech of grinding. She knew she didn't have the upper-body strength to force him off. Instead, she let her sword drop, then spun out of the way. He stumbled, following his sword to the ground. Tressa kicked him on the arse, forcing him all the way down. He sprawled out, his sword just out of his grasp.

"Do it. Do it fast!" Someone yelled in the distance, urging her.

She raised her sword in the air, then stabbed him hard in the thigh. With proper medical care, it wouldn't kill him. "Get out of the ring." She lowered her voice, attempting a growl.

He nodded and reached for his sword. Tressa turned, but a whistle in the air surprised her. She jumped into a roll, using her sword arm as a bar on the ground to break the fall. She stood, her sword at the ready.

The man on the ground had attempted to slash at her legs. Tressa slashed his other leg at the shin. There was no way he was walking now. "Save yourself and get out now."

"I will not leave in dishonor." His arms flailed, losing the stamina he needed to raise his sword.

"Then you will die a fool. It's your choice." Tressa spat at him, then stalked away. What would drive a man to prefer death over life? Another man ran past and skewered him in the stomach. Another senseless death.

After a quick count to fourteen, she realized she didn't have any time left.

The fight was almost over. She was still alive. So were five lions, five wolves, two men of unknown origin, Tressa, and the man with the

braided beard. One of the unknowns appeared weak. He stood trembling behind two of the other wolves. For all the brutality they'd shown, they were protecting the boy.

Why was his life more important than the other wolves who'd died, especially since he wasn't one of their own?

Tressa stepped carefully around the group of men. The wolves

and lions had already decided who had won the honor of serving in Stacia's personal guard. They stood in a circle, their backs to each other. Normally it was a move that invited death in battle. Never leave your back to an enemy. But today that was not a concern for they'd already won in their minds.

The man with the braided beard sidestepped over to Tressa, spinning his sword in one large hand. How could he smile at a time like this? Tressa wanted to punch in his pearly teeth. She held back. Not only was he a worthy fighter, but he could be her only ally.

"We've only got to take out two." He laughed heartily, spit flying between his lips. "Then we're in. You and me, boy."

"Why not just kill me?" Tressa asked. She stayed light on her toes, fearful he might strike her at any moment. Perhaps it had all been a ruse to gain her trust so he could get closer.

"Today isn't your day to die." He pointed his sword toward a lion standing on the edge of the circle. The lion thrust his hips, making vulgar gestures to a woman in the audience. "But it is his."

The beads rattled, breaking the tense silence of the standoff, as her unlikely friend ran screaming toward the distracted lion. The men rallied around him, but it was too late. Her friend's sword had already pierced his belly. He withdrew and sprinted back to Tressa.

Two men chased after him, the tips of their swords glinting in the brilliant sunlight. Clean. Not a trace of blood. Tressa's stomach dropped. Neither of them had made a strike or a kill all day. They were fresh. Not exhausted like her.

"Run!" Braided man yelled at her.

A million thoughts raced through her mind. She could run. That's all it would take. If one of them died, she'd be in. Her goal achieved. One step closer to avenging Connor's death. She stumbled backward, leaving him to his death.

"Go, chouchou!" The man's eyes were wild, light danced in them.

A hand flew to her mouth in horror. "Leo. Gods, no. Leo!" She reached a hand out, then did the unthinkable. She ran back into the

fray.

The two men hacked and slashed at Leo. She thrust her sword into the storm of metal. Her block saved a sword from piercing Leo's heart.

"Go!" He yelled again.

"No!" She begged, forgetting to disguise her voice.

The two men looked at her, their eyes wide. "A girl?" one of them asked.

"Great," Leo said, rolling his eyes while blocking a half-hearted thrust from the shocked men. "Now we have to kill them both. Which one do you want?"

Tressa's eyes narrowed. She took a step back, then attacked. She slashed at the surprised soldier's wrists first, one at a time, leaving gashes in her sword's wake. Then to the neck, shoulders, and stomach. Her sword left his innards followed by sucking sound.

The lion's body crumpled to the ground, bloody intestines draped on his body.

A horn sounded, echoing through the arena. "Stop!"

She turned her attention back to Leo. He withdrew the sword from the other man's throat. They'd killed both, but it was one too many. Now there were only eleven left. They'd violated the rules of the tournament.

"You! Kill him!" The order came from the dais at the head of the arena. Stacia stood strong, one long black fingernail pointed at Tressa.

"He's dead." Leo yelled it for her, saving Tressa from revealing herself again. "I had to," he whispered to Tressa out the side of his mouth, "or he would have revealed your secret."

"No." Stacia laughed, a sound more unpleasant than the blood spurting from the lion's throat on the ground in front of them. "Him." Her fingernail moved to Leo. "You, boy, kill him."

Tressa gaped at her. Kill Leo?

"The men of the Black Guard do not kill each other. He has broken the law. The man next to you is a traitor. Run him through."

Leo raised his sword to Tressa. "You have to do it. If you don't, she'll order you killed too."

"I can't." Tressa fought to stay steady. She'd only just made her first kill without another thought. She didn't feel any pride, just shame. That man hadn't hurt Connor. He'd only been an obstacle in her way to Stacia. Somewhere he might have a wife and children. People who loved him.

She couldn't even contemplate killing Leo to avenge Connor.

Tressa dropped her sword on the ground at Leo's feet. She shook her head. With her arms crossed across her chest, she stood in defiance of Stacia's order.

Murmurs rose from the crowds that were quickly gathering. Word

must have spread that the end was near. Despite the heat of the afternoon, a thin veil of sweat dripped over Tressa's face.

"I won't fight an unarmed soldier," Leo yelled to Stacia. "It's dishonorable."

"It was dishonorable when you struck down a soldier after the twelve had been reached." Stacia yelled. "You will die and you will die by his hand." She pointed again at Tressa.

"She'll have us both killed," Leo said. "You have to save yourself."

"No." Tressa spoke through gritted teeth. "I won't."

Leo lunged at her and Tressa jumped to the side.

"Only one of you will join my guard. Decide it between the two of you. If the boy is too much of a coward to kill the man, then I'll take the man. You have until the sun hits the top of the building behind me. If one of you isn't dead by then, I'll have both of you run through."

"Pick up your sword." Leo swung at Tressa, missing her by only a hair's breadth. He missed on purpose. They both knew it.

Tressa circled him, her hands in the air. "No. Find another way for us to get out of this. You're clever like that."

"There isn't another way. This is your path, Tressa. Time to walk it."

"No."

He slashed at her again, this time leaving a bloody line on her face. Her hand covered the wound. It was all part of the game. He'd done this to her before. Pushed her. Challenged her.

That day she failed.

Today she would fail as well.

She wouldn't kill him.

Leo slipped his toes under the hilt of Tressa's sword and flipped it into the air. Tressa refused to reach out for it. But Leo didn't let it hit dirt again. He caught it in his left hand.

He sprang forward. Leo stood close to her now. So close she could feel his breath on her cheek.

"Fight or we both die. I won't kill you."

"Nor I you."

"We cannot defeat all of them at once. This is the end of the show, Tressa." Leo dropped his sword, only holding hers in his left hand. His right disappeared into his doublet.

Leo turned his back to the dais. The crowd roared with bloodlust, urging them to kill each other. There wasn't a favorite. They didn't care. All that mattered was completing the Black Guard.

Tressa pushed against him, but Leo was too strong. He always was. No matter what maneuver he taught her, she'd never been able to defeat him.

Leo always got exactly what he wanted.

Warmth spread over Tressa's hands. She looked down. Blood trailed down the shaft of a dagger, the hilt resting against her stomach. She followed it to its tip, then gasped.

Leo smiled, blood pooling at the corners of his lips.

"You were my greatest student. Don't take any of this for granted. Avenge me."

Leo staggered backward, the dagger protruding from his stomach.

Tressa stood, shaking so hard and so fast no one could see the extent of her shock. Her sword lay on the ground at her feet.

Another of Stacia's wicked laughs poured over the arena. The final horn sounded again. "We have only ten, but ten of the most brave and cunning men to ever compete! Congratulations to the new members of the Black Guard!"

Riotous applause rippled through the crowd. Mugs of beer clanged against one another. Swords rattled. Men cheered. Women catcalled, offering to cap their day off with a romp.

Tressa stood alone in the center. Leo at her feet. She wanted nothing more than to fall to him. Cradle him in her arms.

But she could not. The other men left standing surrounded her, leading her away. Taking her to the next step of her journey. One she truly now walked alone.

Chapter 44

Naked.

Cold.

Hot.

Fever.

Endless shivering.

CONNOR'S EYES OPENED. Not much. Only a slit. Enough to take in the dank murkiness of his cell. Like before, he heard water drip. Plink. Plink. Plink. An endless maddening sound.

No one visited him.

Not since the night, or day, he wasn't sure, when he awakened.

When she'd looked into his eyes and convinced him she loved him.

After she'd taken him, the grate fell and he was trapped in this prison. At first he'd railed against the metal rods. Screamed until his throat grew raw and his voice left him. Hunger pierced his belly, like a knife twisting inside him.

Every morning he woke refreshed. As if he'd been healed in his sleep. His muscles were more defined. His appetite sated. His throat moist.

The cycle repeated itself. Though he never knew for sure what was morning and what was night. He slept when tired. He fought when rested. There was nothing else to be done until she came back.

"How are you, my pet?" She sauntered into view outside his prison.

"Let me out." If he demanded it, surely she would let him go.

Her laughter, echoing in the vast cave, told him he wouldn't get what he wished.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I needed a new mate. The others were less than worthy. I killed them." She reached in between the bars, a black fingernail tracing the contour of his cheek. "You were happy to oblige before, remember?"

He remembered too well. It haunted him in his dreams. Lust and anger locked in a battle. She had won and he hated himself for

enjoying it.

“I have something for you, my love.” She set a bag on the ground. “It’s something we made together.”

Curious, he waited while she pulled something hard and round from the bag.

“What is it?” he asked, overcome with wonder. It shimmered in the faint light of the cave. A hard and knotty gray shell covered with blue specks. Connor reached through the bars to touch it.

Heat traveled from his fingers up his arm.

“I brought it here to you because I love you. Because I knew it would keep you warm.” She glanced at his naked body and his obvious arousal. “Do you miss me?”

“Every day. Let me out. Please.” He did miss her. He hated her. He wanted her. More than anything, he was desperate to recall a memory from before he’d woken up in the cave. Down there, trapped and alone, his memory was nothing more than an empty void.

She chuckled. “I can’t do that. But if you want me, I think that can be arranged.”

The bars dissipated, metal vanishing into mist. The woman stepped into his waiting arms, covering his lips with hers and teasing her tongue into his mouth. Something deep within told him to push her away, but her hands convinced him otherwise.

They made love again and again until he fell asleep.

When he awoke, the bars were reinstated.

The strange object sat not far away. He lay next to it, feeling the heat emanating from inside. She was right. It would provide him warmth and comfort.

Tressa grew used to poor hygiene. The men of the Black Guard bathed together only once a week. She avoided it, claiming her religion prevented her from baring her body in front of the other men. Leo coached her ahead of time on this, knowing it would be an issue.

Leo.

Another innocent lost. So much death. So much grief. Thinking of him always threatened to bring tears to her eyes. But she couldn't allow herself to cry in front of the other men. Not even for a moment. She was one of the elite now.

The only other one who remained behind from the weekly soak was the boy. The one they protected during the battle. He won a spot without drawing blood. Not his, nor another's.

The boy slept all the time. At first Tressa thought he was only avoiding her. That was until his unbearable snoring began. She tossed a pillow over her head, but it didn't muffle the grinding noise. Instead of listening to him, she ventured outside.

Tressa followed the shouts of the men bathing in the pond. Leo had told her to learn as much as she could about each of them. Where they came from. Where their loyalties lie. Even within the ten, there would be factions. If Tressa ever needed help or escape, it wouldn't hurt for her to find out which was most sympathetic.

If any.

Leo cautioned her not to trust any of their words and very little of what she saw. Men didn't fight to protect Stacia because they loved her. They did it to protect their families, gain favor, or advance their own secret motives. Her mother had commanded respect and loyalty. Stacia's reign inspired treachery.

She encouraged it, allowing the Black Guard to exact revenge on people who wronged their families. Being a member gave them power to rule the villages they came from. Stacia kept them well fed, strong, and an unending stream of women sashayed through their apartments, willing to fulfill their every sexual desire. In return, the Black Guard gave her their loyalty.

A loyalty that hadn't ever been tested. No one dared defy her. Yet

Leo wasn't so sure it was due to fear or lack of interest. Stacia's political power was tempered. No one invaded. The Drowned Country sat on the coast. Hutton's Bridge blocked them from the road to the north. Few diplomats from the other realms ever traversed the forest asking for an audience with her.

No, Leo had told her, Stacia's rule was solid, but unchallenged. She had no allies beyond the fog. While Tressa had viewed her village's plight as a personal struggle, Leo taught her that it affected the entire land of the dragonlords. Hutton's Bridge cut off the Drowned Country, leaving them to fend for themselves.

A stray boat from The Sands would meander into port once in a while. Trade wasn't heavy anymore, though. They survived off of their own wits.

Before Hutton's Bridge was enveloped in fog, The Drowned Country had been an influential power. Now they were isolated. Alone. Stacia's army was only needed to guard her against her own people. The thought of invasion from another dragonlord was near impossible.

It was the best time to strike Stacia down. None of the other dragonlords would care and by the time they found out, it would be too late anyway. Her people didn't love her. The Black Guard kept up appearances for their own ambitions.

All Tressa had to do was get close to Stacia, kill her, and slip away, letting the rest of them work it out. Connor would be avenged. Now Leo too. Tressa could go home and figure out how to help her people. Spend a quiet life with Bastian. Get to know her father better.

One of the men's voices startled Tressa back to reality. She slipped behind a tall bush, careful to conceal herself. If they caught her spying on them, she doubted the reception would be pleasant.

The man of unknown origin, named Jarrett, stood stark naked on the path. Tressa peered at him through the thick pines, flashes of his dark skin visible. She held her breath.

He wiped a wool towel up and down the length of his body, then he wrapped it around his midsection. She eyed him, pushing a little farther into the bush to get closer.

Yes, he would be a formidable opponent. She didn't want to get in a fight with him. One-on-one there was no way she would win. Her strengths lie in misdirection and a well-placed sword tip at the right moment. He was one of the brighter soldiers in the group. She couldn't take him in a fight.

Half the battle was knowing who to attack and who to leave alone. But she needed allies too.

"Jarrett! Get back here. Your arse is still dirty and the whores don't like that on a man of the Black Guard."

Jarrett rolled his eyes. "I'll take my chances," he shouted back to them.

The sound of splashing water dominated the otherwise quiet scene. The men were really enjoying themselves out there. To Tressa, it seemed as if they were only a group of boys, not men who'd killed and maimed hundreds for a spot in an elite guard. Jarrett was different. Quieter.

He let the wool slip to the ground and Tressa caught a glimpse of his entire naked body between two branches of the pine. At first she felt guilty, then brushed it aside. Bastian had been with Vinya for years. He'd not only seen her naked, but had sex with her. Voluntarily. It wasn't as if he'd refused her while waiting for an outside chance to be with Tressa again.

She let the warm feeling pass through her body. Not fighting it. Happy to know she could be attracted to a man other than Bastian. For so long she'd wondered if there was something wrong with her. She was relieved to know it was only the limited choice in her small village, not a lack of interest in sex.

She reminded herself she'd committed to Bastian. And he to her.

Now was the worst time for her feel those stirrings, especially for a man she couldn't yet trust. He was also the main guardian of the boy who slept, rattling the foundation with his snoring.

Tressa needed an ally, but she also needed to tread carefully, and not let a perfectly shaped and very clean arse get in her way.

Later that night, Tressa snuggled under the covers. A cool breeze drifted in, dancing over her exposed toes. She pulled her knees up higher. Her toes snuggled into the bottom of the blanket, ready for a night of uninterrupted sleep.

She needed it. Days of training with the other men had left her exhausted. Moving took more effort than breathing. Stillness was her only respite.

Snores echoed through the room. It was the boy. Henry. She'd learned his name when she stepped up to spar with him, only to be pushed to the side by Jarrett. He was always at Henry's side.

At first she wondered if they were brothers, but if they were, they did not share two parents. While Jarrett was dark skinned with ebony hair and goatee to match, Henry looked like a newly bloomed daisy on a bright spring morning. He was about as sturdy too. The boy swayed away from half-hearted thrusts, barely able to lift his own sword.

He reminded Tressa of herself on her first day of training. She could dispose of him in seconds if she chose. He was a waste. A disgrace to the Black Guard.

She'd sacrificed everything to be there. Left her lover. Lost her

mentor. All she'd given and yet this boy entered the fold unscathed.

Her mind swam in a sea of thoughts, just on the edge of sleep. It was her favorite moment of the day. When her thoughts swirled and she could feel her body twirling as her muscles relaxed and she slowly drifted into unconsciousness.

Or she would have if something hadn't touched her arm. "Are you awake?" the voice whispered.

Tressa didn't move. Shift in the wrong direction and he might get a handful of her breast. She'd slipped the binding off before undressing and pulling on her nighttime shift. She had to let them down at some point.

"It's me, Henry."

Tressa held her tongue. What did the boy want with her? They hadn't spoken more than a word to each other.

"Thank you."

"For?" Tressa asked, remembering to disguise her voice. Though in a whisper, she wasn't sure Henry would be able to tell the difference.

"For trying to fight with me and not treating me like a child."

Tressa nodded, still unsure why he felt the need to tell her this now.

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

Tressa was about to ask that very question when a dark hand clamped over Henry's mouth.

"It's bedtime, boys." Jarrett's head peeked over Henry's shoulder. "No more fanciful stories. We're all equals here. We have no past. No future. All we have is in service to our queen."

"Do you really believe that?" Tressa asked. Leo told her none of the guard felt that way anymore. It was all a power grab for their families.

Jarrett pushed Henry off toward his bed. The boy didn't argue and skulked the rest of the way to his bed. He pulled the covers over his head and within a few breaths he was asleep again. Jarrett turned back to Tressa. "If you don't, she'll kill you. Her braid..." Jarrett trailed off.

A cloud moved across the full moon and for a moment, Tressa only knew he was there by his steady breathing.

"I know. I've seen what it can do." Tressa's voice trembled, despite her efforts to stay steady. Images of Connor's murder flashed in the darkness. Moonlight erased them as the clouds continued their march across the sky.

Tressa jerked backward. Jarrett was much closer than she'd realized.

"I don't know what you're doing here, but you'd better watch your back." Jarrett turned, looking over his shoulder. "The men here would

kill you if they knew what I know.”

Tressa concentrated on her breathing. In and out. Even. Steady. Not afraid. Her heart pounded erratically, but in the darkness there was no way Jarrett could tell. “What do you think you know?”

“That you’re here to kill Stacia.” This was followed by a long pause where neither of them spoke, or made a sound of any kind. “I am too.”

The next morning Jarrett didn't act any different. Neither did Tressa. She must have stayed up for another hour or two thinking about what he'd said. An ally was a good thing. But could she trust the man?

He guarded the boy, whose identity Tressa still hadn't discovered, and he seemed close with a few of the other men.

What bothered her more was the assumption he'd made about her. Tressa thought back to every move she'd made since Leo sacrificed himself. What gave her away? It was also possible he was fishing for a traitor.

Instead of querying Jarrett, Tressa chose to go on as if nothing happened. If he told the truth, it would be apparent in time. He'd have to prove himself with actions. Though what those would be, Tressa didn't know. Not until that afternoon.

Henry and Jarrett stood in the center of the ring. The afternoon air was cool and crisp, lit by a bright sun. A faint scent of ripe apples hung in the air, though Tressa hadn't seen one yet. They were given meat at every meal. Presumably to bulk them up.

Henry jumped from side to side, his sword flailing in the air. Not one of his blows came close to landing on Jarrett. As far as Tressa could tell, he wasn't even trying to dodge the tip of Henry's sword.

"Son of the gods," one man grumbled from the side of the ring. "How long do we have to put up with this child? If the queen is ever attacked, he'll do nothing to help her. He'll only get himself killed."

Jarrett eyed the man, his gaze cutting sharper than the finely honed steel of his sword. His scrutiny fell upon Tressa. She shifted from one foot to the other, curious. "He's protected," Jarrett said.

The golden-haired man, Aland, snorted. "Only by you. We did what was asked of us. Got him into the guard. Nothing else was required." Aland circled Jarrett and Henry, his sword raised. "Why are you still protecting him?"

Jarrett turned his back on Henry. He motioned for the boy to run by Tressa. She shook her head. She had no reason to protect the kid. Not when her arse would be on the line with the other men. Jarrett

rolled his eyes at her reluctance. Henry fidgeted next to Tressa. She pretended she didn't notice him.

"The guard are not supposed to fight each other," a short, stocky man called out. Tressa struggled to remember his name. Warrick. No, Barden. Yes, Barden. He was twin brother to the largest man Tressa had ever seen, Marden. They shared the same womb, but the two couldn't be more different. He stalked off toward the outer ring where his brother stood, calmly watching over all of them like a mountain.

Jarrett held out an arm toward Aland. "Listen to Barden. I protect the boy because he can't protect himself."

"But you're not teaching him anything. You let him prance around like a pony on parade. It's embarrassing to the rest of us. The next time we're called to attend the queen at a public event, he'll make a joke of us all. Let me work with him." Aland feigned an attack at Jarrett, and then switched direction. His feet pounded in the dirt as he ran toward Tressa and Henry, his sword held at his hip.

Tressa pushed the boy backward with her hand and stepped between them, her steel in the air, ready to block Aland's attack. His sword fell hard on hers. She slipped to her knees, still trying to push him off. Aland's upper body strength was far more than hers. She fell to the ground and he pressed on.

"Your quarrel isn't with Max," Jarrett yelled, referring to the male name Tressa had taken. "If you want blood, then fight for it." He swung his sword, level with Aland's neck. A gush of blood fell on Tressa, drenching her face in the copper scent. A sticky trail dripped down her cheek toward her ear.

Aland fell backward. Tressa scrambled to her feet. Had Jarrett killed the man for his bravado? And to what end?

Before she could determine his fate, Henry pushed down on her back. She fell again.

"Are you okay, Max?" he whispered in her ear.

"No." She swatted him back again. This time to protect him from her anger. "Leave me alone and I'll be just fine."

She looked up at Aland. His chest was moving up and down. Alive.

"Why did you do that," she hissed at Jarrett.

"He cannot touch Henry." Jarrett calmly explained. "Tomorrow when he wakes up from the nasty headache I gave him, he'll think twice about ever coming near Henry again."

"Why is he so important?" Tressa eyed the boy. He was rubbing his elbow as if he'd been hurt as badly as Aland. The sad thing was that Aland was right. The boy would embarrass all of them. She wouldn't blame Stacia if she disbanded the guard and held another tournament. One whose outcome wasn't partially predetermined because men were paid off to protect another.

Though Tressa couldn't hold it against him too much. The same had been done for her. At least she tried to appear as if she knew what she was doing.

Jarrett leaned over, offering Tressa a hand. She hesitated to take it. Her palms were calloused just as much as any other hardworking person, but her fingers were slight and delicate like a woman's. She wasn't even sure they could pass for a young boy's digits. Though she kept them hidden in heavy gloves, the grasp of one person helping another to their feet could give her away.

She placed both hands firmly on the grass and pushed to standing.

Jarrett offered the same to Henry. He, of course, eagerly took Jarrett's hand, as if there was no other way he could have gotten up.

"Henry is my secret weapon. I paid these men to protect him, though they don't know that. An emissary contacted them for me." Jarrett spoke while he cleaned his blade. The other men were staying far away, presumably waiting for his temper to calm. "I need him here and I need him alive."

Tressa took another look at Henry. She couldn't see how he could be dangerous, much less a secret weapon against Stacia. She'd eat him alive.

"Stacia has her braid. You've seen it kill, I'm sure." Jarrett said. "She just took another victim a few months ago. An interloper from another land."

Yes, Tressa had seen. It was the reason she was standing in front of Jarrett.

"But," Jarrett continued, "Henry is not so different from Stacia."

Chapter 47

Jarrett sauntered away, dragging Henry behind him. His words felt like more mystery than facts. He'd told her nothing useful. Certainly nothing that would engender her trust.

After the training session, she took off for the pond alone. The other men were napping. They claimed it was to re-energize their muscles and preserve their stamina. Tressa felt they were only being lazy. She'd worked just as hard, if not harder than them, and had no interest in closing her eyes.

Tressa took one last look around the forest before slipping off her clothes and diving into the pond. She emerged, only her head above the water, and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on her face. The cold droplets energized her.

She lifted one arm out of the water and flexed her bicep. A smooth muscle popped up from her arm. She smiled. All of her hard work with Leo paid off. She was exactly where she needed to be and one step closer to her ultimate goal. It was physical proof of everything she was working toward.

"Go on, give it a little kiss. You know you want to."

Tressa gasped and slipped under the water. She opened her eyes and frantically searched for shore. It wasn't far. The ground sloped upward quickly. Unfortunately two feet stood in the shallows, the toes wiggling, almost taunting her.

Slowly she resurfaced, but only to her chin.

"Jarrett."

"Max."

"I already explained it's against my religion to be seen without my clothes. If you'd leave me to my bathing, I'd appreciate it."

"I only wanted to talk to you more." He sat down on a rock, his feet still in the cool water. "I promise I won't look."

"I don't want to talk to you." Tressa forced herself to consume steady, even breaths. Her confidence quickly waned. One wrong move and he'd know her truth. "You only speak of treason to our queen, the woman we've sworn to protect."

Jarrett rolled his eyes. "Stop the act. I knew the identity of every

man entering the tournament. I knew his reason for entering whether it was blind faith to the queen, the need to secure his family's future, or even to get away from an arranged marriage." He scratched his chin at Tressa's look of surprise. "Yes, men hate those too."

He pointed at Tressa. "But you are the only one whose intent I didn't know. It wasn't clear to me until the last man died. Leo would not give his life for just anyone."

Leo. He knew Leo. Even in the disguise. Even when Tressa didn't see until near the end who the man with the braided beard was.

"This was how I knew you could be trusted."

"How did you know Leo?" She had to know. Jarrett had crossed a line, giving her the permission to speak true.

"Leo was my father."

Tressa let the information sink in. He'd never mentioned a son.

Jarrett waved a hand in the air. "My mother was the only woman he was ever intimate with. It was that night he knew his pleasure lay elsewhere. Fortunately it was after he'd deposited his contribution to me into her."

He stood up and took off his shirt. Jarrett's dark skin glinted in the sunlight. Tressa averted her eyes.

"Is it against your religion to see others naked as well?"

Tressa heard the swish of his breeches fall to the ground. "It is a private matter." She hoped her voice didn't waver. When the water rippled and sloshed, she looked back at him. Jarrett was submerged to his waist.

He tilted his head to the side. "Were you my father's lover?"

"No." Tressa couldn't help but laugh. "He was like a father to me."

Jarrett's eyes narrowed.

"I'm sorry. I apologize. That was insensitive."

"No." Jarrett waded closer. "Truth is always the right answer, whether it's appropriate or not. I had a stepfather and he was a good man. He cared for my mother and for me, and the children they had together. I was never treated like another man's son."

Tressa stopped herself from telling Jarrett she grew up without a father. It wasn't his to know. She couldn't allow herself to get closer to him until she knew he could be trusted. Just because he claimed to be Leo's son, it didn't make him trustworthy.

"I'm telling you this because I feel we can trust each other." He took another step toward Tressa.

She stepped back.

"I need an ally. I think you do too." Jarrett held out his hand, but she refused to shake it.

The clear blue water lapped against the top of Tressa's shoulders. She bit back a response. She didn't want to trust him. But he was

right, she needed an ally too.

"What makes Henry so special?"

Jarrett sighed. "It's better if you don't know."

"Then why should I trust you?"

"You can honestly deny the knowledge."

"I could lie."

"There are ways others will know if you speak the truth or not. Skilled in torture, they take pleasure in other's pain."

Tressa folded her arms across her chest. Jarrett had been inching ever closer and she wasn't sure how much he could see through the water.

"Lies keep us from fully reaching our potential. If you're not encumbered by Henry's truth, then you can focus on your own lies."

"I have no lies."

"Just unspoken truths." Jarrett's eyes fell to her shoulders. "I've studied fighting since I was a young boy. Combat revolves around what you cannot see. If you only trust what your opponent shows, the battle is lost before it is begun."

Jarrett's hand floated on the water, only inches from touching her. Tressa didn't flinch. Weakness wouldn't give her away today.

"And with you, there is a secret. Something you don't want anyone to know. Something my father died to protect. What is it?"

"I have no secrets. I came here to fight for a place in the Black Guard. I won it. There is nothing else to know."

A smile spread across Jarrett's face. He was amused. Tressa was not.

He shrugged, turned, and began moving back toward shore. "Just don't let the other men catch you out here alone."

The water lapped against his back. Then the top of his hips. And touched the arse Tressa had spied through the bush yesterday. Still clean. And firm.

She blinked, reminding herself she was a man. Or at least pretending to be one.

Jarrett pushed the excess water off of his legs with his palms. Tressa's heart pounded. He stood there completely naked and unashamed. Of course he did, though. He thought Tressa was a man too, and he probably assumed she wasn't looking at him. Religion and all that.

Jarrett pulled his breeches and shirt on, covering the stolen view. He sauntered over to Tressa's pile of clothes. He picked up the fabric she'd been using to bind her breasts.

"No, you don't have any secrets worth keeping, do you?" Jarrett looked at her, letting the fabric fall between his fingers to the ground.

Tressa said nothing. She made fists and kept them steady at her

thighs. If she had to defend herself nude and soaking wet, she would be prepared.

"I had hoped you'd work with me on your own accord. I wanted to create a bond between us." Jarrett shook his head. "I need another fighter on my side to protect Henry. One who won't hesitate to step into the shadow of darkness. Unfortunately you didn't listen to reason, so now I'll have to blackmail you."

Jarrett turned back to Tressa.

"I hope you don't mind, sweetheart. I won't tell the other men they have a woman in their midst as long as you do exactly as I say."

Instead of cowering before Jarrett's threats, she decided to make some of her own. Warm air brushed against the water dripping from her skin as she made her way back to shore.

Tressa knew weakness would only get her killed. Leo taught her that. So she stood in front of Jarrett, completely naked. "You tell anyone I'm a woman and I'll slit Henry's throat while he sleeps."

Tressa expected Jarrett to laugh. Instead his face remained serious. "I will accept those terms, but they go both ways. Now what is your real name?"

"Max is all you will ever know. Now go while I get dressed."

"I'll stay a bit up the path and make sure no one else comes upon you as I did."

"I highly doubt anyone else will wake up early from their precious nap to take a bath." Tressa mumbled as she pulled on her breeches and then began to wrap the binding around her chest. It was hard enough to do alone, much less while Jarrett looked on unashamed. "You followed me here."

"And it's a good thing I did. We share a common goal."

Tressa grunted. She pulled the binding tight and reached awkwardly to her back to tuck in the excess.

"You need help with that?"

Tressa glared at Jarrett.

"Just trying to help." There was that smile. She wanted to wipe it from his face.

"I can manage just fine on my own, thank you. I thought you were going to wait a bit up the path while I dressed." She yanked her shirt over her head and punched her fists into the sleeves.

Jarrett looked at the ground, then back at Tressa. "I suppose I got distracted."

She expected a wink, but it didn't come. The man was infuriating and impossible to understand.

"Don't count on it happening again." Tressa scooped up her pack and slung it over her shoulder.

"You might want to find another place to be this evening," Jarrett

said as he followed Tressa up the path.

"Why?"

"The men were talking about bringing in a few whores."

Tressa sighed. She stopped and turned around. "Thank you."

"I'll be taking Henry to a local pub, if you'd like to join us."

"Most men would think Henry is just the right age for such a thing."

"Most men don't know Henry the way I do. It's a bad idea."

She bit her lip and looked into Jarrett's eyes. "Do you want me to take Henry to the pub?" Tressa felt awkward even asking. "I mean, so you can stay back with the other men and their, uh, entertainment?"

Jarrett grabbed Tressa's chin, forcing her to look up at him. "I don't take pleasure in a woman who doesn't take pleasure in me."

Tressa nodded and continued up the path. There was no more to say. Instead, she focused on how to kill Stacia and get back to the life she'd always wanted.

Tressa took a quick look around the pub. She didn't recognize any of the regulars from The Rooster's Wattle. She let out a little air and relaxed.

Staying back at the compound with the others wasn't an option. The women, with their painted faces and perfumed bodies, poured into their chambers, their laughter bringing the promise of a night of debauchery. Hutton's Bridge didn't allow prostitution. Keeping the family together was one of the more important rules in their town. When inbreeding became a concern, sex had to be regulated. Control was vital to their survival. Here, there were too many people. No one had to worry about the survival of their town. Pleasure and leisure were in abundance.

Sweet smoke filled the air. Ira hadn't allowed smoking in his pub. He was too worried it would burn down. Tressa had learned that the fear of fire was a monetary concern. The owners here were either very brave or very wealthy. One glance at the decor told her wealth was the answer.

Golden filigree tipped the statues on shelves near the ceiling. The room glistened and glittered. The men sitting at the tables gambled at cards. Stacks of coins spilled in front of them. The thrill of the game mattered more than the money they took home at the end of the night. It was a far cry from the dirt and dust in Ira's pub.

Henry pushed ahead of Tressa, knocking her to the side with his elbow.

She wanted to say something, but she'd promised Jarrett she'd keep her mouth shut. Instead, she shot him a dirty glance.

"Come on, boys, let's grab a table." Jarrett flourished his black cape.

The room went quiet.

The servers scurried over to them before Tressa's butt touched the bench.

"How can we help you?" A young blond smiled at Tressa. Her white teeth spoke of wealth. Even the serving girls probably had more money than Tressa did.

"We'll take a side of meat, a loaf of bread, a bowl of grapes, and a flagon of your finest wine."

The serving girl's eyes sparkled as the boys poured water into their cups. "We just got in a shipment from the The Dragon's Tongue Port, sir. The wine is perfectly aged and smells of vanilla and raspberry. Very rare. Imported directly from The Sands."

Jarrett reached into the bag hanging at his hip and pulled out a handful of gold coins. "I hope this will cover the cost." He held out his hand to the girl. Her eyes grew to the size of saucers. Even Tressa had to hold back her surprise. It was a sizable amount of money. More than Tressa had ever seen in one place.

"Yes," the girl bowed and backed away, "yes, that will do, milord." She spun and ran off to the kitchen, probably to brag about the tip she was about to receive tonight from the men in the Black Guard.

"Impressive," Tressa said.

Jarrett shrugged. "It's a small amount to me. I have plenty more where that came from."

Henry paid little attention to them. He was far more interested in the fireplace. He'd wandered over and stood warming his hands.

"Who are you?" Tressa asked. Every moment with Jarrett brought more mystery and less understanding.

"Who are you?" Jarrett leaned his chin on his fist, his elbow propped up on the table. "We both have our secrets, but we have a common goal. Isn't that all that matters?"

"You're exactly like your father." She laughed, remembering a similar conversation with Leo.

"I'd love it if you could tell me more about him." Jarrett leaned in closer.

A crash on the other side of the pub wrenched their attention elsewhere. Tressa glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see a fight. They were common at The Rooster's Wattle. Nothing worth worrying over.

Except when Henry was involved. The boy's arms were above his head, the man behind him held Henry in a headlock.

Jarrett jumped to his feet, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Let him go."

"Just because yer in The Black Guard, it doesn't mean you can steal from me."

Henry stood still, not even fighting back. Tressa had a hard time believing the boy had stolen anything, yet hanging in a limp hand was a golden trinket. She thought she'd seen it above the fireplace when they walked in. Yes, it was the golden cat statue.

The pouch filled with gold still dangled from Jarrett's hip. Why would Henry steal when Jarrett had enough money for all of them?

"Are you the owner of this establishment?" Jarrett asked the man who held Henry in a headlock. The man nodded, but didn't relax his hold on Henry. "This was just a misunderstanding. I'm sure Henry was just looking at it. Weren't you Henry?"

"It's mine." Henry stated.

Jarrett sighed.

Tressa stared at Henry in earnest. He'd barely spoken until then, and now he was saying the wrong thing.

"Give it back to the man, Henry. Now," Jarrett said. "It's not yours."

"It's gold. It's mine." Henry tightened his grip on the trinket.

The owner didn't appreciate Henry's attitude and kicked him in the back of the knee. He let go and Henry fell to the floor in a tired heap. "Give it back, you pissant. It's not yours." He reared, ready to deliver an even stronger kick when Jarrett wedged himself between them.

"I'm sorry." He wrested the trinket out of Henry's hand and handed it back to the owner. Then he reached into his pouch and plucked out a few more gold coins. "Take these for your trouble. We'll leave and we won't be back."

The owner's eyes narrowed. "The two of you are welcome." He pointed at Jarrett and Tressa. "But not him. I don't care if he is part of the guard. There's something wrong with the boy and I don't want him scaring off my customers. How did someone like that make the Black Guard anyway?"

"They protected him, they did."

Tressa turned around. It was a man at another table, taking a break from playing cards. Everyone in the place had stopped to watch the fiasco.

"He was the boy who didn't fight a lick. Couldn't even lift his sword. Anyone who went to watch saw it. A lot of good men died. Men who could have stood proudly in the place of him. But, no, he made it in anyway."

Jarrett hooked his hands under Henry's arms, pulling him to his feet. "Let's go," he said to Tressa. She took one last drink from the mug. The bitter wine rushed down the back of her throat.

Henry struggled only half-heartedly against Jarrett's tight grip. "I want it. It's mine. Give it back." He twitched, then shook violently in Jarrett's grasp. Spittle formed at the side of his mouth.

"Get him out of here. He's diseased or something. I won't have him ruining my pub," the owner shouted behind them.

Jarrett dragged Henry out into the street. He tugged him around the corner into a dark alley. Tressa followed behind. Peeking over her shoulder, she was relieved to see no one else was watching them.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked Jarrett.

Henry fell to the ground, his arms and legs spasm violently. Jarrett

kneled next to him. "You're about to learn our secret. Keep guard and make sure no one comes back here." He grabbed Henry's collar and pulled him farther back into the dark alley.

The sound of wrenching was accompanied by a stench worse than week-old raw chicken. Tressa kept watch at the end of the alley, but no one walked by. She abandoned her post and ran into the darkness. Whatever was going on back there needed to be seen. She no longer cared if anyone stumbled upon them. If there was any chance Jarrett was in danger, she felt compelled to check on him.

Her feet crunched on the occasional pebbles underfoot. The dirty alleyway was littered with rubbish from the pub on one side and the inn on the other. She glanced up. No windows to cast candlelight on them also meant no one could spy on them.

"I told you to watch the entrance to the alley." Jarrett said, his voice stern.

Tressa held her arm over her nose. The smell was nauseating and only grew worse with each step she took. "I was worried you're in danger."

"I'm not," Jarrett retorted. "Damn it, if you're not going to be the guard, then I have to protect us. I don't have time for this."

Muffled sounds echoed in the darkness. Tressa could only see whispers of shadows until a small burst of wind rushed past her toward the alley's entrance. A light glowed at the end of the alley, forming a shimmering barrier between them and the street.

She stumbled backward and tripped, falling to the ground. Her fingers felt something cold and scaly. "What is that?"

"Henry," Jarrett said. "Or do you mean the barrier I put up over there? That protects anyone from seeing what's happening here."

Tressa didn't know where to start. Henry's reptilian skin or the magic Jarrett had just cast.

"Yes, it's magic. Yes, I did it. Yes, Henry is changing."

Tressa gasped. "Can you read my mind too?"

Jarrett laughed. "No. It's pretty obvious what you were thinking."

A small light came to life, illuminating their corner of the alley. A bauble floated in the air, not far from Jarrett's shoulder. Tressa glanced down at Henry. His blond hair had all but disappeared, replaced by a head all too reminiscent of the dragon that crashed into Hutton's Bridge.

"Dragon." Tressa wasn't even sure she said it out loud until Jarrett responded.

"Yes."

"But Henry is human," she said, stumbling over her words. She reached out to touch him, then thought better of it and jerked back her hand. "Isn't he?"

"In a way," Jarrett said. "Now you know about us."

Tressa let loose a nervous laugh. "Know about you? All this has done is raised more questions. I don't know anything. I know less than I did when we sat in the pub. No, I don't know anything about you." Her nervous rambling didn't help calm her. Henry continued to convulse and change. From the neck down, his body was contorting, changing into something else, something she wasn't even fully sure she believed in until that moment.

The dragon that broke through the fog died within moments. She only saw the claws that pulled Connor's body through the doorway. Both seemed distant, somehow disconnected.

But this. Henry. He was more alive than any of the others. He'd been warm on the way to the pub when she'd put her hand on his back to guide him around a corner. His blue eyes had sparkled. He was fully human, a fact she never doubted.

Yet now he was something else. The metamorphosis took only a few more moments. His shoes tore, talons poking through the leather. Then he rested. It was done.

Chapter 49

The people of Hutton's Bridge gathered in the center of town.

Packs hefted on their backs, weapons in their hands.

Huddled in small groups, they whispered. Nervous conversation permeated the entire town square. Bastian strode through the crowd, Farah's hand in his. He nodded to Lukas. "Now."

The boy's aunt patted him on the head, then pushed his back. Lukas smiled and came running to Bastian.

"Take care of my little girl." He knelt down and handed his daughter's hand over. "Maybe someday the two of you can be joined."

Farah's eyes lit up. "I'd have to choose his ribbon, Papa."

The little boy looked less excited. Bastian laughed. "Where we're going, there isn't any need for ribbon picking, Farah." Then leaned over and whispered in Lukas' ear, "Don't worry. I only said that to make her interested in sticking with you. There are no promises being made today."

Lukas let out a long sigh. "I will protect her, sir." He looked down at the little girl's doe eyes. She fluttered her lashes at him.

Carrac stood at the edge of the fog, a torch in his hand.

"That won't help. The fog will only extinguish it," Bastian said.

"It is not for you. But this is." Carrac extended an open hand into the fog. Instead of disappearing, his hand glowed.

Bastian took in a breath. "What is that?"

"Tallow. I supervised the dressing of the dragon and had some fat on my hand. I must not have washed so well and when I went to bed that night I noticed my hand was glowing. I snuck out under the cover of darkness and cut the rest of the fat off. Then I made the tallow. If you rub it on yourself, it will glow. Even in the fog."

"Can we use it?"

"Of course!" Carrac laughed. "It is yours to take. I had hoped it would aid you, but I didn't want to mention it until I was sure. It took time to create and test the candles. I've handed them out to the torchbearers. When you're ready to light them, just say the word. I've already instructed them on what to do."

"Thank you!" He squeezed Carrac's shoulder. "You are staying

behind with Udor? Making sure he doesn't mess things up for the town when we collapse the mist?"

Carrac nodded. "I have been considering this as well." He looked down at his aged, frail body. "What can I do out there? If the beasts you spoke of are true, I am no match for them. All I could do is stand in front and be a victim, maybe stop them from hurting another. Slow down their progress."

"I'm not asking for blind sacrifice." Bastian looked at the old man's rheumy blue eyes. After Sophia died, he was the oldest person in the village. His opinion mattered. His experience and his kindness were invaluable. "Stay here. No one will interpret it as weakness. In fact, I'd consider it a personal favor. If Tressa makes it back to the village, I don't want her alone with Udor."

Carrac laughed, his bony shoulders shaking. "I think Tressa can handle herself with Udor, but I appreciate the sentiment." He looked over Bastian's ragtag army to the village beyond. "Yes, this is my home. I'm too old for a new journey. I will stay." His eyes met Bastian's again. "I hope to see you again."

"I hope for the same, Carrac." Hutton's Bridge held nothing for him now. A new life awaited him and his daughter beyond the forest. He'd be back for her as soon as he destroyed the barrier, never to return.

Bastian turned to the townspeople.

"Today we leave Hutton's Bridge. When I left not more than a few months ago, I never expected to survive, much less come back. When this is all done, you have a choice. Leave and find a new life in parts unexplored, or come home and help revive Hutton's Bridge."

Bastian looked toward the village hall. "Those of you who have volunteered to stay here with the sick and the children will follow Udor's command." He hated giving Udor that power, but someone had to lead them. He was the obvious choice.

"For those of you who've chosen to fight, if you choose to return, life will not be the same. Many of the protections put in place will no longer apply. The yearly group forced into the fog. The ribbon choosing. The lack of weapons and training to use them. Hutton's Bridge will be born anew."

No one responded. Not a cheer of excitement, nor murmurs of dissension. The silence frightened him most. If there was no fervor, not one way or the other, Bastian couldn't be sure he'd succeed. He needed commitment from them. Not resignation.

"Then let's march!" Bastian waved his sword in the air. He spun toward the fog and marched off. The sound of reluctant shuffles followed behind him. Bastian's heart thudded in his chest. He knew what hid on the other side of the fog.

Anger grew inside him. How could they be so dispassionate? They

knew he was the only one who ever returned. Fear, trepidation, anything would be better than their lack of caring. But this was pathetic. His hands formed fists, but he held them firmly at his side. Taking his anger out on them wouldn't help. If they didn't believe it for themselves, he couldn't force them to.

The fog reached out, caressing Bastian like an old lover tempting him back into a destructive relationship. Tendrils swirled around his ankles, leaving russet droplets on his brown boots. A reminder of what was and an invitation of what was to come.

He could delay no longer. Bastian took a deep breath and stepped into the fog.

Within moments, his vision left him. The familiar darkness overcame his senses. "Don't be alarmed," he called behind him as gasps from his fellow townspeople drifted to him on the light breeze.

The silence of the dead forest combined with the blindness. A familiar disorientation settled over Bastian. Even though it was his third time through, he still felt his stomach turn. Maybe because he knew what was out there, hiding, waiting to devour him.

Long moments passed, enveloped in the damp curtain of fog. Bastian put one foot in front of another, traveling in a straight line toward the end of the fog. Maybe they'd make it through without running into the beast. If killing Vinya was its last act, maybe she'd bought freedom for all of Hutton's Bridge.

"Bastian."

So it wasn't dead. It sounded like Tressa, but it was only a poor imitation.

Bastian's lip curled. Did the beast really think the same trick would work on him twice? Maybe that was the only trick it had. At least he was prepared this time.

"Bastian." It came from his left.

"Bastian." From his right.

"Bastian." A screechy chorus of death surrounded him, followed by a cacophony of names.

"Draw your arms!" He yelled to his men. "Don't listen. It'll try to trick you. Make you think you're hearing a loved one. You're not."

A fury of howls ripped through the mist.

Them. More than one beast. From the sound of it, they were surrounded.

Chapter 50

"Now," Bastian yelled. Light from Carrac's dragon candles blasted through the fog. Twenty beasts stood in a semi-circle in front of the ragtag army.

Their fangs bared, dripping with blood and spittle, the beasts towered over them, twice as tall as the humans, bodies covered in bristled hair, claws longer than Bastian's sword.

Bastian's legs trembled. His stomach rebelled. But he held his ground, not showing the monsters his fear. Instead he gazed on them with darkened eyes and a fire burning in his soul.

"Bastian."

The voice came from the beast in the center, its lips moving, mocking Tressa's voice. Snarling, its jaw dropped, releasing hideous laughter.

"Attack!" Bastian broke free of the safety of his group and lunged for the beast in the middle. His sword swung in the air, dropping in a deadly arc toward the beast's belly. Roars enveloped him, masking every other sound in the forest. The cries of his people fell away. It was only him and the beasts.

He hacked and slashed, using every ounce of his strength until his muscles shrieked for respite. Fur flew in the air, followed by flesh. The light gray fog quickly changed to maroon, oozing with the blood of the beasts. Or of his companions. Bastian wouldn't turn away from the battle to see.

A wooly, muscled arm flung out at Bastian, knocking him down to the ground, taking all of his breath in one fell swoop. His sword slipped, just beyond his reach. Bastian shook his head, forcing clarity to return.

Through the mist, he saw a pike sticking out from the chest of one of the beasts, one of Bastian's men hung from the shaft, his legs dangling in the air. Still he didn't give up, Tom thrust with all of his strength, desperately attempting to drive the spear deeper into the beast's chest. The beast howled, sending chills down Bastian's spine.

He pushed himself up to sitting, but his head still swam from the impact. The battle raged on around him. His men and women stepped up to the challenge, fighting the beasts with a passion and bloodlust Bastian didn't know they had possessed. Simple life in Hutton's Bridge

hadn't dulled their instincts after all.

Chips of oak flew through the air as their hastily made shields splintered upon impact. The might behind the beasts' arms arcing through the air were no match for their shields. Still, it bought time and the people of Hutton's Bridge needed every second they could muster.

Another wave of men came running through the fog, leaping toward the beasts. They hacked at their ankles, bringing beast after beast down to its knees. One beast lifted an arm, his paws bearing three of Bastian's men impaled on its claws. He popped all three in his mouth, filling the forest with the sound of crunching bones.

Men and women fell to the ground, landing in puddles of blood. The beasts were winning. Not one of them was felled yet.

Bastian heaved himself to his feet, reached down for his sword, and took off running. It was time to give the advantage to his people. He zigged and zagged through the battle, jumping over fallen friends without a second glance. At the feet of a beast, he speared it in the calf, then hoisted himself up and over its knee. His fingers knotted into the beast's fur, he pulled the sword out of its calf and stuck it in the beast's hip, pulling himself up again.

The beast swatted at him, but Bastian used its own momentum against it. Like a fly, he hopped around, never letting the lumbering beast touch him. It was used to fighting slowly in darkness, but Bastian had the advantage of light this time. He was quicker and more agile. Time to prove to the townspeople that the beast could be defeated.

Bastian pulled his sword out of the beast's hip. With one final thrust, he slid the sword into the beast's heart.

It cried out and stumbled to the side. Bastian pulled on his sword, then stuck the beast again in the same spot, giving the hilt a twist. Blood spurted out of its mouth, raining down on the assailants.

Bastian couldn't help but smile. He held on tight as the beast fell to the ground. Bastian climbed on top of its head. "They can be killed!" he yelled, shaking his sword.

The townspeople rallied, their arms swinging faster, thrusting harder, emboldened by the victory.

One after another, the beasts fell, until only Bastian's army remained standing. Not without significant loss of life to the residents of Hutton's Bridge. Bastian walked among the dead, speaking their names aloud and committing them to memory. He'd brought them there and if he couldn't bring them home alive, he'd at least remember them.

"Now what, sir?" Garrick, one of the younger men of the community who shadowed him asked, "Are we free?"

"The fog still stands. We have one more foe left to defeat."

"It can't be worse than those." Garrick pointed at the dead beasts with his sword.

"I don't know," Bastian said. "We're about to find out."

Chapter 51

"*L*et's move." Bastian wiped the blood off his blade with a large leaf.

"Where to now?" asked Tom. Blood was smeared across his face, erasing the smile he'd always projected. Battle changed him. It would change them all.

"If we keep moving ahead, we'll make our way out of here in no time." Bastian pointed ahead into the mist. He motioned to one of the candle bearers to come forward.

As the boy walked, the light bounced off the mist and tree branches, giving the forest a more frightening appearance. Beasts had lurked in those shadows, drawing villagers from Hutton's Bridge to their deaths for many years. No longer.

"Walk with me," he told the boy. "We have no reason to hide any longer."

The boy nodded nervously. Still he kept pace with Bastian. Their feet trudged through the damp undergrowth. Bastian's breeches were soaked to mid-calf and clung to his legs like a snake to a vine.

The dragon candles still shone in the mist, illuminating the landscape Bastian had only felt until that day. Trees of all kinds, birch, oak, and maple, reached up toward the sky. Lichens meandered up and around trees, crawling from branch to branch, connecting the trees to each other in an intricate dance of life. Centipedes scurried, their legs scuttling faster than a hummingbird's wings in flight.

The mist clung to everything, a shawl enveloping the forest in its protective embrace. At least this time Bastian could see it all instead of worrying his deepest fears lurked in its depths. He knew its secrets intimately. He'd defeated the beast. The woman in the trees, and her two companions on the other edges of the forest, only seemed to care if something, or someone, was entering the forest. He finally felt he had been given a blessing to leave.

Adam nudged Bastian with his elbow as he slipped up next to him. "All the wounded have been cared for or taken back to the village. There are about fifty of us left for the next battle."

The woman in the tree. She was Bastian's next target. It would be tricky. The upper branches of the tree wouldn't hold the weight of all of his warriors. He needed the strongest and the most clever. The ones who could think quickly and act accordingly.

It would be impossible to sneak up on her. Climbing the trees would take a few minutes and it was unlikely they could do it quietly enough to surprise her. If noise even mattered. Her body was tied to the tree in some magical fashion. It was likely she knew their every move on the way up. The rest of the men would remain on the ground, to catch them if they fell like Bastian did the first time, or climb up and attack if their comrades fell.

"Those numbers are good. More than I expected," Bastian said.

Adam raised an eyebrow. "You fought well today. So did the others, considering their lack of experience."

"You think we were lucky." It wasn't a question. They both knew it.

Adam nodded. He looked back at the candle bearer. The boy made no indication he was listening to them. "The beasts were frightened and disoriented by the light. It weakened them."

"Their advantage lay in the darkness of the mist, I know." Bastian shuddered as he remembered the trouble they had caused him. Of the lives lost.

"And in their size."

Bastian laughed. "In some ways that worked against them too." He looked up at the trees, knowing they were getting ever closer to the edge of the forest and their next target. His words dried up, sober.

"What do we need to know about her?" Adam asked. He switched his pack of medical supplies from one shoulder to the other. Bastian noticed it wasn't as full as when they left Hutton's Bridge.

"She has great magic, for one. Beyond that, I do not know. Her heart appears to be fed by the tree sap. Or maybe she gives life to the tree. I wish I knew more about how her magic worked before we climbed up. Sophia's book didn't tell me much."

"We're just lucky Carrac discovered the power of dragon tallow." Adam pointed at the lantern. "Without it, I'm not sure we would have beaten the beasts."

Bastian nodded. "There is so much we don't know. I saw things beyond the forest that I don't understand. Children there know more than we do."

"We'll learn soon enough. I, for one, cannot wait." Adam rubbed his hands in anticipation. "Finding new medicines to save lives. New procedures. I have to believe they're farther advanced than I am."

"They are." Bastian remembered the doctor who'd claimed he could save Connor before he'd been stolen from the infirmary. "I have a feeling you'll have more to learn than you can in your lifetime."

"That's fine with me. I've been ready to leave Hutton's Bridge for years."

"Then why didn't you ever volunteer to go into the fog?" Bastian asked. His uncle hadn't ever shown interest in leaving before.

Adam sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I promised Sophia I'd stick around and keep an eye on you and Tressa. She implied there was something special about the two of you." He rolled his eyes. "Just an old woman's rantings, but I didn't want to worry her. I wanted to leave, but it didn't mean I was willing to commit suicide in the fog. When you came back, it was nothing short of a miracle."

Bastian hung his head. He'd brushed death too many times over the last few months. He didn't believe in miracles, especially after seeing his mother and Tressa's father living in a hidden settlement in the forest. He wasn't special. He was persistent.

"I wouldn't have followed anyone into the fog," Adam said. "Though it never occurred to me to follow my nephew. I should have gone with you the first time you left. I never should have let Connor go. He had a wife he loved. Children. No one would have missed me."

"Hutton's Bridge needs your healing knowledge. Without it, they'd all be dead from plague." Bastian stopped abruptly. He reached out and grabbed the shirt of the candle bearer in front of him, pulling him backward. The fog was dissipating quickly. They'd reached the end.

But there was one more battle ahead.

He nodded his head toward the tree, one finger over his lips, then he pointed up.

Adam motioned for silence to the men behind them. The forest was still, their chests, alive with breath, the only movement.

Bastian checked his sword. It was secure in the scabbard. He reached up, hoisting himself into the lower branches of the tree. The branches he'd broken in his fall the last time through were still hanging askew. Still, he climbed, knowing she was up there somewhere.

He emerged above the fog, face to face with the woman in the tree. He reached out, touching her hand. As hard as bark, and as fragile. With the slightest snap he could break off her fingers. He took care to use a light touch. If Sophia's book spoke true, the woman was as trapped as the rest of them. A slave to the magic she'd wrought eighty years ago.

The last time he'd been there, she hadn't paid him any attention before the bird flew into view. It was a threat to the village. All he needed was to create a danger to rouse her from her slumber. Bastian whistled a signal to Adam.

A bird flew upward, released from a bag Adam had carried with him. Bastian hated sacrificing the colorful warbler. Short of attacking the woman, he didn't know of another way to get her attention.

The bird flew up to Bastian, flitted around the branches, and rose higher up the above. The woman's eyes snapped open, focused on the bird. Her hand lifted. Green blood pumped through her veins,

preparing to fire her magic.

“Wait!” Bastian pleaded. “Don’t hurt it.”

Her gaze left the bird and burned into Bastian. “You again. You are dead.” Her green lips whispered like spring leaves.

“I need to talk to you. I’m from Hutton’s Bridge.”

Her hand drifted down to her side. “You must go back. Stay hidden.”

“No.” He argued as gently as he could. “It’s time for us to leave. It’s time for the fog to fall.”

She stared over his shoulder at the fog. “I tried to protect you from the dragon.” The green blood pumped harder, her veins bulging and popping.

“It landed in the village, where it quickly died.” He hoped reassuring her would calm the anger.

“I have failed.”

“No. You protected us. You did as you said you would. But now we can stand on our own again. You must let us be free.”

“My brother to the east tells me Sophia asked for the fog to remain. Every year she visited him, begging them to maintain the fog. We did as she asked.”

Sophia? In the fog? Bastian couldn’t help but think of the book Udor had found in the cottage. How much had she known? What had she done?

“Sophia is gone now too.”

A tear of sap slipped from the woman’s eye. “She was the last of the originals.”

“Yes. Now it is time for us to be freed.”

“Perhaps it is.” The woman stepped from the hollow, vines still connecting her to the tree. She laid a hand on Bastian’s shoulder. “Are you prepared?”

“Are any of us ever prepared?”

Her branch-like fingers dug into his skin. “We only wanted to protect you.”

“You did. You saved countless lives. But now it’s time to let us go.”

Her jaw dropped. A sound like the rustling of leaves in the height of fall tumbled from her mouth. The trees responded, gaining momentum until it appeared the entire forest was shaking in rhythm.

He stood still, not sure what he was waiting for.

The fog began to dissipate. Like a sheet falling from a clothesline in the summer breeze, the fog drifted to the ground. Bastian knew it was gone when the whoops and cheers of his fellow townspeople reached his ears.

When it was done, she looked at him again. “Now what becomes of me?”

“Can you leave the tree? You are welcome to come with us.” Bastian looked at the branches, entwined with her own limbs. He’d separate them one by one if he had to. It was the least he could do for her.

“I am the tree. We live together. We die apart.”

“Then I swear I shall protect this part of the forest as long as I am alive. And before I die, I will teach others to do the same.” Bastian reached out, caressing the bark.

Her eyes closed. “That is the first time I have been touched in years.” The leaves sighed along with her. The trees swayed lightly under his strokes. “If only I could live again like I used to. I had forgotten the pleasures that come with flesh.”

Bastian pulled his hand back. “I am sorry for your imprisonment.”

She smiled, her teeth stubs of bark. “It is well, human. It is well. Journey on with my blessing. And if you ever need me to protect your village again, I will help. All you need to do is ask. Leave now. Seek your destiny.”

“Thank you,” Bastian said. He climbed down carefully, reaching the ground quickly. “Those of you with family back in Hutton’s Bridge, head home quickly and let them know the way out. There is a city ahead, but it isn’t friendly to outsiders. You can stay in Hutton’s Bridge, but know that seeking your fortune elsewhere may not result in a happier life. I will forge ahead and look for medicine.”

He wanted to forget all of it and search for Tressa, but now that the fog was gone, she could find her way easily alone. If she still lived.

A bell rang in the distance, awakening her from the edge of slumber. Men scrambled out of their beds. Feet fell on the floor, echoing in the room.

"Get up!" Jarrett yelled at Henry.

Tressa slipped out of bed, not knowing exactly what was going on. "What is it?"

"We're being summoned to Stacia's side. Something's wrong." Jarrett glanced at Henry. He gave the boy a poke in the ribs. "Get up!"

The other men were putting on their armor, metal clanging on metal, ringing in Tressa's exhausted ears.

She pulled her armor from under her bed and tugged it on. She glanced at Henry out of the corner of her eye. He was still human. After transforming in the back alley the night before, Jarrett reassured her he'd change back before the sun rose. They just had to stay with him and protect him until then.

Every hour or two, she and Jarrett traded sleeping and keeping watch. Just before the sun rose, Henry's form settled back into the one she'd known since the tournament. They all stumbled back to their quarters, exhausted and ready for the day of rest that had been promised to them.

Tugging on her gloves, Tressa sighed knowing that rest was far from attainable. The clanging of the bell only became louder, more insistent. Two of the men had already left their quarters, rushing to Stacia's chambers to relieve the men who'd been there all night. They'd been promised whores on their return, but Tressa had been relieved to find they'd all cleared out before morning.

Horny, grunting men was the last thing she wanted to hear while she'd tried to grab the last few moments of sleep. At least something went the way she wanted it to.

Henry rubbed his eyes, not eager to get out of bed. After what he'd been through the night before, Tressa felt sorry for him. She didn't see him as the lazy child she'd taken him for just hours ago. Most children went through a change as they entered adulthood. Many times it lead to them making poor choices or having trysts with others in the back

of a barn. For Henry it meant pain. Exhaustion. Confusion.

She wanted to take the boy in her arms and hold him until the pain went away. Tressa looked up at Jarrett. "He's not well enough to go."

"He must," Jarrett said. "He'll cope." He reached over and pulled the rough woolen blanket off of Henry's balled up body. "Up, boy. We have a job to do."

They were the last to leave the room. Henry dragged listlessly behind Jarrett and Tressa's insistent tugging.

The rocky walls blurred by Tressa. She ran as fast as she could without letting go of Henry. He'd finally woken enough to be dragged out of bed. Jarrett had splashed water on Henry's face and droplets still fell to his armor from his hair. It had been enough, though.

A determined look swept across his face. He seemed more alert than Tressa had ever seen him, almost making her wonder if she'd imagined his bizarre behavior in the pub the night before.

Henry tugged his arm back, slipping it easily from Tressa's grasp. Truth was she hadn't been trying too hard. He'd never offered resistance. She turned around and glanced at him over her shoulder. Yes, he was definitely more in control than ever.

"It's part of the transformation." Jarrett whispered to her. They couldn't be too careful in the palace. Ears were everywhere. "He's a good boy. Strong. He just becomes weaker before, well, you know. I felt it was coming last night, but wasn't sure. It's completely unpredictable until he learns to control it."

Henry jogged between Jarrett and Tressa, barely a puff of exhaustion on his face. "Sorry I've been so childish lately. Sometimes it's hard to work through the fire pumping in my veins." He winked at Tressa.

She stared at him, her mouth gaping. Back erect, muscles flexed, and confidence in his face had changed Henry from a petulant boy to a young man.

"I'm embarrassed about my behavior during the tournament. I would have much preferred taking a few heads myself. Unfortunately, I wasn't feeling myself that day."

It was as if his voice had deepened overnight as well. It wasn't just the dragon that was changing him. He was rapidly becoming a man.

"How do we explain this?" Tressa pointed a thumb at Henry. "Until now he was a simpering fool."

It was Henry's turn to drop his jaw. "Was I that bad?" He looked at Jarrett, who shrugged, a smile on his face. Henry turned back to Tressa. "Maybe you can teach me a bit about being a man, seeing as you're so good at pretending to do it."

She looked at him again. Suddenly she felt she was the out of place

soldier. Henry's miraculous recovery from his illness was going to make her stand out even more.

"She's going to help us, Henry." Jarrett placed a hand on Henry's arm. "Don't."

"I was only kidding," he said, winking again. It was a gesture Tressa was starting to hate. "You know that, right Max?"

She nodded. They were close to Stacia's chambers. He'd gotten the last word. It wasn't over though. She needed Henry and Jarrett to make her plan work. They needed her help because during Henry's moments of weakness Jarrett needed an ally.

"What's going on?" Jarrett asked Kelton at the door.

"A barrier has been breached," Kelton said. "She's furious. Pacing. Stomping. Screaming about war and blood and honey. Isn't that the oddest thing? Honey?"

A pit fell in Tressa's stomach. Honey. Hutton's Bridge had been famous for its honey before the fog. The barrier that kept them from the rest of the Drowned Country.

Her hands started to shake. Her people should be safe, still nestled within the fog that had trapped them for eighty years.

She felt cool steel. A sword. Jarrett had shoved it into her hands, giving them something to do other than tremble. She would thank him later. Now she gripped it tight, letting the hardness toughen up her fears.

"What does she need us to do?" Jarrett asked. "Is there an imminent danger?"

Kelton shook his head. "No. We ride out as soon as the horses are ready. We have a battle ahead of us, men."

Henry slapped his fist to his chest. "Finally, a real fight. I can't wait to smell blood." His tongue slipped out and ran over his lips.

Kelton raised an eyebrow. "You're feeling better, boy."

"Yes, I am. I feel like conquering the world. This is a great place to start." Henry slung an arm around Kelton's shoulder. They walked into Stacia's antechamber together.

Tressa watched them saunter away. As soon as they were out of earshot, she leaned over and whispered to Jarrett. "You trust Henry?"

Jarrett wouldn't meet her eyes. Instead, he kept his focus on Henry's retreating form. "I have to." He lowered his voice. "The truth?"

Tressa nodded. Finally she'd learn the whole story.

"My queen of the Yellow Throne demands her second son take the Blue Throne from Stacia or be banished forever without water or a camel. I am his only guard. My life is his."

Then hers was too. He knew her secret and could expose her at any moment. "Let's get this skirmish settled and then we strike the queen."

"Agreed." Jarrett drew his own sword. "The boy should be able to control his form soon. He will be ready to rule as soon as he does."

Tressa felt there were more qualifications for being a ruler than turning into a dragon, but it wasn't time to argue. She had to know who they were marching against and why.

Tressa and Jarrett followed the men into Stacia's chambers. She sat in her throne, one blue leather clad leg hanging over the arm, a spike-heeled boot swinging in the air.

"Close the door!" She shouted to Tressa. "I don't need anyone else hearing this. No need to cause a panic just yet."

The door slammed shut with a thud. Tressa turned around. She had a feeling she might need some extra support.

Kelton bowed at Stacia's feet. "How can we serve you, my queen?"

Stacia's blue eyes narrowed. She gazed at each of them in turn, as if she were weighing their very souls. Tressa forced herself to breathe normally. In. Out. Evenly. She would let nothing give her away. Stacia's eyes lingered longest, not on Tressa, but on Jarrett. The side of her mouth curved up.

"Each of you has sworn to protect me. For many years now we've lived in peace in the Drowned Country, thanks to the fog surrounding the ghost town of Hutton's Bridge. It has made it very difficult for our enemies to travel the roads to our kingdom. They can only land at our ports, which are heavily guarded by my personal army."

Stacia waved a hand in the air, her long fingernails tearing through the smoke created by the cinnamon incense burning next to her throne.

"Everyone here knows how important it is to maintain the boundary of fog. No one passes through it and lives."

Tressa swore Stacia's eyes blinked a few times too many. They both knew some had emerged and survived. Stacia killed one and she didn't know about Tressa's father's encampment. If Stacia wasn't willing to tell even her elite guard about it, then Tressa had hope they could still succeed.

"But today something has changed. The fog has fallen."

A lump of air caught in Tressa's throat. She held her lips tight, refusing to let out the surprise. She had so many questions, too many to ask without looking suspicious. Her heart raced, but she continued practicing the breathing Leo had taught her.

"I need half of you to ride out with the army. Kill anyone who emerges."

"But, your highness, there's no one to kill. The town of Hutton's Bridge only has ghosts for residents. No one could survive in the fog," Edgar said.

Stacia rolled her eyes. "I do not fear ghosts. Nor should you. You

must protect our borders from the other kingdoms. One of them did this, found a way past the boundary. Ride out. Gather intelligence. Kill anyone who puts up a fight."

Five men, all wolves, stepped forward in unison. "We volunteer to lead the army into battle."

Stacia briefly bowed her head. "I accept. Your bravery will not go unnoticed."

The five men left the room. Only Tressa, Jarrett, Henry, and two others remained.

"I need the remainder of you as my private guards. I want two of you stationed outside my door every hour of the day. No one comes or goes without my express permission. You may assume we are at war. With who, I don't know. Until we have that answer, trust no one. I want one in my chambers with me at all times. Two outside my door and two to rest and then rotate in." Stacia pointed one fingernail at Jarrett. "I want you with me first. The rest of you may leave. Rotate in four hours."

Tressa opened the doors and shuffled out. Her heart was torn. She desperately wanted to ride out with the others and see if her town was safe. It was possible they'd done something to collapse the fog. Or maybe it was Bastian and her father. No matter who did it. Her people were in danger and she was stuck defending the one person she wanted to kill.

"Let Henry and I take the first rest." Tressa grabbed his sleeve and yanked. "We only got in to our beds a few minutes ago. I can't stay awake and I'm sure he's exhausted too."

Henry nodded and flashed a brilliant smile. "Too many high class whores last night. Not the nit-infested whelps you boys toyed with. See you in a few hours."

The men glared at them as Tressa and Henry walked away. She could feel their anger like a knife to the back. They walked in silence back to their chamber.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, but you don't have to be an ass about it," Tressa said.

Henry raised his eyebrows. "I'm second prince in line to the Yellow Throne. I can say what I want, when I want to. You're just a silly girl, pretending to be a boy." He reached out one hand, grabbing at her chest. "I can't even feel your boobs. You do have them, don't you?"

Tressa knocked his arm to the side. "Don't ever touch me like that again or I'll do more than block you."

"I'm not afraid of a girl." Henry rolled his eyes.

"You should be afraid of this one."

"Where I come from, women are only for cooking, cleaning, and whoring. They are our servants." He looked her up and down,

disgusted. "They don't chop off their hair or pretend to be men. They stay quiet and spread their legs when we tell them to. Admit it. You want me, even now." He stood tall, his hands on his hips, golden hair swinging just above his shoulders.

"The only part of me that wants to touch your crotch is my knee. Now lay down and get some sleep until we can talk to Jarrett. Stacia is without half of her guard. We may be able to finally do what we've all come here for."

Henry sat on his bed. He yanked his boots off one by one and tossed them at the edge of Tressa's bed. Without another word, he laid on the duck feather mattress.

Tressa settled down on her bed and didn't relax until she could hear Henry's signature snoring. Instead she thought about Bastian and wished there was some way she could get word to him or her father. Until Jarrett came to relieve them, there was nothing she could do.

Bastian's lips fell on Tressa's in a heated embrace. Her back arched, shivers ran up and down her spine. It had been so long, too long, since he'd wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to him.

Before she could open her eyes, he abruptly pulled away.

"Get off of her!"

Tressa sat up, rubbing her eyes. Henry lay sprawled on the floor and Jarrett stood over him. She shook her head, then realized what had been going on.

"If anyone had seen you kissing what they think is another man, we'd have a whole host of problems on our hands."

Tressa's cheeks turned red. "Wow, and thanks for defending me."

Jarrett glared at her. "There was nothing to defend other than our secret."

"What?" She stumbled to her feet.

"You were kissing him back. I thought you had more restraint than that, but after how you presented yourself to me at the pond, I should have known better."

Tressa shoved Jarrett. "I was dreaming. I had no idea I was kissing Henry." She rubbed her sleeve across her lips and tamped down a flare of revulsion.

Jarrett's jaw dropped. He stared at Tressa for a moment, then reared back and kicked Henry in the stomach. He bent over, but Tressa grabbed his arms and tugged him back.

"Don't," she said. "Just let it go."

"If your mother knew how you were treating an unwilling woman..." Jarrett sank down on Tressa's bed, his head in his hands.

"My mother sent me away to steal a throne," Henry said, still doubled over in pain. "I don't think she cares what I do so long as I take it and claim it for The Sands."

"Your mother would chain you in the dungeon for a month. You know it as well as I do. Learn to behave and do it now!"

Tears streamed out of Henry's eyes. "It's the dragon. It made me do it." He looked up at Tressa, his eyes pleading. "You believe me, don't

you?"

She didn't know what to believe and she wasn't sure it even mattered.

"What did you learn in your time with Stacia?" Tressa asked Jarrett, interested only in moving on from the incident with Henry. He was nothing but a petulant boy. She wanted Stacia gone, but she wasn't sure Henry was the answer either. The lesser of two evils. Tressa wanted a third option.

"Not much." Jarrett tossed another annoyed glance at Henry and sat down on his bed. He ran his hand through his hair. Bangs flopped down over his eyes. "She mostly paced. Then she tried to seduce me."

Henry slid across the floor and sat at Jarrett's feet. "Tell us more."

Tressa was only mildly curious. She looked at Jarrett. Nothing gave him away. No blush. No anger. It was as if he said Stacia had offered him a prune.

"There's nothing to tell. She disrobed and ordered me to take her." Jarrett paused.

This time Tressa knew it was for drama's sake. She rolled her eyes and got up off her bed. Henry drew even closer to Jarrett, hungry for details.

"And?" Henry asked. His begging was more pathetic than Jarrett's attitude.

"And I said it was time to switch the guards. I walked out of the room and headed straight here."

Henry's face fell. "I would have done it."

"Which is why you won't be alone with Stacia anytime soon. You'd forget your mission."

"Mother didn't say I couldn't have sex with Stacia. She only said to kill her and take the throne."

Jarrett sighed. "Men must learn to utilize self control, Henry. This is the second time this week I've been in close proximity to a nude woman and managed to control myself."

Tressa dug through her trunk, looking for nothing other than a way to keep her pink cheeks hidden from them. If he told Henry, she'd never hear the end of it.

"You're a lucky man, Jarrett," Henry said.

His envy was misplaced. Jarrett's kindness. His chivalry. His prowess with a sword. Those were the things Tressa wanted Henry to admire him for.

"I choose to treat women with respect, Henry. You should give it a try once in a while."

"Anyway," Tressa said, sitting back up again once she was confident Jarrett wasn't going to tell Henry his first nude girl of the week was her, "what is our next move? I say we kill Stacia now.

Before the rest of the guard gets back. There are only five of us here. The three of us," she shot a wayward glance at Henry, "can dispose of the other two. Then we can take down Stacia."

"That was my thought as well," Jarrett said. "The men left about a quarter hour ago. There's nothing standing between us and Stacia now. Take up your arms."

Tressa reached under the bed for her sword. She belted the blade around her waist and let her hand rest on the hilt. She was calm. Resolute.

Henry grabbed his sword and brandished it in the air, pretending to kill an invisible enemy. "Let me be the one to kill her."

Tressa crossed her sword with his, the screech of iron raising the hair on her arms. "No, she's mine to kill. You can have the throne. I've no use for it. But she's mine. Do you understand?"

Henry looked at Jarrett and slowly lowered his sword. "She's a feisty one, isn't she? Too bad she wasn't one of the naked girls."

Jarrett winked at Tressa. "Yes, too bad."

Tressa felt the blush return, at least this time she was already out the door and into the hallway before either Jarrett or Henry could see her reaction.

She had more important things to do. It was time to kill Stacia.

Bastian's head swam in a sea of blue and purple fists. After the

fog fell, it didn't take long for the army to arrive. He'd expected that, but not so soon. Before he'd had the chance to get to the city, Stacia's entire army showed up and took him captive.

They tried to fight back, but less than fifty men against hundreds of armed, trained soldiers was futile. Bastian urged them to put down their weapons. He didn't want to lose any more men in a skirmish they couldn't win. It wasn't worth the loss of life. Each man had a friend or brother or wife who loved him the same way so many had loved Connor.

That hadn't stopped five men dressed in black from knocking Bastian out. He hoped his men were being treated better than he was. Only the sway of the horse's canter and the smell of its well-timed droppings pulled him out of his stupor. The turd shot down the pallet Bastian was tied to, landing on the top of his head and rolling down the side to his ear where it finally came to rest on his shoulder. The sweet and earthy smell invaded his senses. If it weren't for the sharp scent of waste, he might have stayed asleep, lost in a dream of reuniting with Tressa.

Instead his head bonked on the wooden pallet any time it rolled over a rock. He'd have a headache, and not just from the beating.

His hands were bound at his stomach, but his head was free to loll about. He looked to his left, the poop still resided on the right shoulder, and groaned. The forest still surrounded him, the thatched roofs of taverns, inns, and shops danced above him, their roofs mingling with the trees. People milled in the street, taking a long gander at the man bound and dragged through town. They passed the tavern where he and Tressa had sat on their first day. Then came the town square where Connor had lost a battle he hadn't even been able to fight.

He was back where he didn't want to be. Bastian's wrists couldn't move. The rope only dug in deeper when he tried. Instead he closed his eyes and attempted to come up with a new strategy. He'd always relied on his brawn, Connor's words, and Tressa's ideas. With his own

ability hampered, he missed his friends even more. Together they had power, greater than any of the magic or dragons in the world. Apart, he felt useless. What good was muscle when he was tied up and unable to fight?

After fifteen large rocks, nine deep ruts, and a slight twinge of nausea, the horse came to a halt. It excreted once more, giving Bastian's left shoulder its own companion.

Men in black uniforms with long swords stood over his pallet arguing.

"You cut him free from the pallet and Barden and I will hold him down."

"No, you cut him free. I want to have my hands on him when we present him to the queen. I'm the one who knocked him out in the first place. I deserve that honor."

"Only because you were lucky!"

"We're brothers of the Black Guard, you shouldn't be so concerned about how this makes you look."

A set of hands burst through their argument and pushed them aside. "You three are pathetic." The man, as large as Bastian, twice as wide, and as solid as a mountain jammed his foot into Bastian's crotch.

Stars swam, swallowing the world into a bright vortex of pinks and blues. He vaguely felt the ropes fall and thump on the ground. His upper arms were surrounded by the tight grip of two men. Only then did the pressure on his crotch subside. The world slowly came back into focus.

"Walk! We aren't going to drag you!"

Someone behind Bastian kicked the back of his knee, forcing his leg to bend. He stumbled, but kept his footing. One slow step followed by another and another.

"Good, good, keep it up now. A few flights of stairs and then you'll be given a nice chair and a place to rest." The guard guffawed and elbowed Bastian in the ribs.

Bastian ignored the pain radiating through his abdomen. He pushed away the fear over how much it hurt to breathe. Instead he focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Every step would get him closer to Stacia. Closer to the woman who'd killed his best friend. Step. Closer to the woman who'd turned his life upside down. Step. Closer to the woman who was probably about to kill him. Step. Closer to the woman whose neck he wanted to snap in two. Step.

They entered the castle. Like the horse, his muddy boots left their own gifts behind on the marble floors. He smiled in triumph. It wasn't much, but it was something. Someone, other than the guards, would know he'd been here.

Bastian's tongue dragged over his parched lips, sensing every

ripped piece of flesh and tasting dried blood. He needed water. It was possible he'd never drink again. That they'd just kill him when they took him before the queen. It might be close to the end.

He flexed an arm, but it barely responded. He didn't have the strength to fight back. At least not enough to win. But he'd fight until the last moment. That he knew deep in his soul. He wanted to win. He needed to win. He'd give everything he had to walk out of the castle alive.

Four flights of stairs later, the guards stopped outside a set of doors, three times taller than Bastian and carved with vines and swirls and flowers. It was beautiful. Exquisite. Far too delicate to contain a woman like Stacia.

The man who stood like a mountain and cast a shadow just as wide stepped between Bastian and the doorway. "You will stand before the queen and you will tell her how the fog fell. You will tell her why. You will tell her anything she asks or my foot won't be on your nuts this time. It'll be up your ass. I assure you, you don't want that."

So she was in there. Behind the doors as beautiful as a summer's day. Bastian found that ironic. It was the last place he would have looked for her. Maybe that was the point. A beast hidden by beauty.

The doors swung wide open. One guard stood behind the queen, his breeches around his ankles, her dress lifted. "Come in. We're almost done here." She looked over her shoulder. "Well, finish up, will you?"

He stood there, jaw dropped, hands shaking on her hips.

"Intimidated by a little audience, are you? Then stop, by all means. I'll get it done elsewhere." Stacia elbowed him. The guard stumbled backward, his manhood limp. He fumbled with his breeches for a moment. Bastian couldn't bear to watch. It was embarrassing for everyone by the reactions from the other guards. Perhaps Stacia was the only one who took it in stride. "And don't leave. Stand next to me while they present the prisoner."

The guard nodded. He attempted to stand up straight, but it was clear he'd been shamed in front of his fellow guards. Bastian almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Stacia walked away from her throne toward Bastian. Her eyes narrowed and she tilted her head to the side. "I know you, don't I?"

Bastian didn't respond. He only stared, hoping against all hope that his strength would return. The closer she got, the more he ached to strangle her. He wanted to wrap his fingers around her snowy neck and squeeze until her eyes rolled in the back of her head and her last breath escape her red lips. His blood pumped. His eyes grew wider. Adrenaline filled his veins.

"You're the boy I captured months ago." One black fingernail

danced across his chest. "Though not so much a boy anymore, are you? Remind me again why I let you go."

Bastian's lips didn't move.

She laughed. "You weren't as worthy as your friend. You may have been bigger, stronger, but your friend had a quality you always lacked. Perhaps it was intelligence."

Stacia's eyes searched Bastian's face. He refused to offer a reaction.

"And there was a girl with you. A homely girl with brown hair and small breasts. Did the two of you run off into the forest together and drown yourselves in each other? Enjoy a little carnal snack based off bloodlust? Did seeing your friend die finally throw her into your arms?"

She pulled her hand back and laughed. "It did. I can see that in your eyes." Stacia spun around. The hem of her turquoise dress brushed against his breeches. "Where is she now?"

Even if he knew, he wouldn't tell her.

Stacia's lower lip jutted out. "Aw. You don't know, do you? Did she leave you in the middle of the night? Head out to find a man who reminded her more of your friend instead of you? Strength can only take a man so far. There has to be something going on up there." She tapped her head with a fingertip.

Stacia turned to the mountain of a man. "How beaten is he?"

He bowed. "Enough, my queen. He will not be able to fight back."

"Excellent execution of my orders, Marden. Then leave. I want to be alone with him."

"My queen, that isn't wise." He stood between Bastian and Stacia. "I would not advise it."

"I can take care of myself, Marden. One man cannot defeat me."

"Very well." Marden snapped his fingers. "Follow me."

"And leave just the guard outside my door. You men did well today. Head out to the tavern and find yourselves whores. On my coin." Stacia grabbed a small silken purse and tossed it to the man.

"Thank you, my queen." He gripped the sack in his massive palm as if losing it would mean losing life and limb. Marden motioned to the other guards and they followed him out the door.

Bastian stood in the center of the marble room. Columns rose high above them. Silks draped the walls, cascading like the branches of the trees outside the windows.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Stacia sidled up to him, not close enough to be within reach. He'd have to lunge and he wasn't sure he had the strength for that yet. "I grew up here, climbing in the branches, swaying from the limbs. Leaves and dirt would get stuck in every crevice and my mother would force to me to spend as much time bathing as I'd spent playing out there."

Stacia lifted one arm, her perfectly manicured fingernails swiped through the air, taking a slice off of Bastian's face. Blood trickled down his cheeks in lines, dropping to his chest. Still, he refused to flinch despite the burning pain.

"So you're the one who took down the fog. Mind telling me how?"

Bastian stared out at the sea.

"The fog has been there through my whole life and through my mother's. She spent years trying to figure out how to remove it so she could bring her precious little Hutton's Bridge back. She always worried its people had starved to death without help from the kingdom. She cared so much."

Stacia slapped him.

"I wanted the fog up."

She slapped his other cheek. Blood covered Stacia's palm. Her tongue slithered out of her mouth and she licked every last bit of it off. A small drop remained at the corner of her lips, glistening.

"Now you'll tell me how you brought it down so I can get it back up again before another kingdom makes a move on my throne."

Bastian imagined taking Tressa on the beach. They'd hold hands and run through the water. It would be a first for them both. Maybe a way to start their new life together, away from Hutton's Bridge and everything they were forced to be there.

"I'm going to kill you either way." Stacia sighed. "I wish you didn't already know that. I can see it in your eyes. Those damn green eyes give away too much. That's why you'll never succeed as a warrior. You care."

Bastian looked at Stacia. Her eyes were blue, ringed with a faint pink. He'd never seen eyes like hers. They were on the verge of being on fire.

"Tell me."

He swallowed, the spittle running down his throat as if it were made of a million shards of glass. His lips parted, taking in a shallow breath. "Water." He exhaled.

"No." Stacia leaned in, her face only inches from his, their noses nearly touching. "Tell me. Then you'll have all the water you can drink."

"Liar."

She tossed back her head, laughter falling from her lips like a volcano spewing lava.

Stacia threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling his face close to hers again. "If only you weren't so beaten. I could have found another way to convince you." She reached down with her free hand and squeezed between his legs. "You may not be smart, but you are deliciously attractive."

Her tongue wound its way over his face, tasting the grime and blood and maybe even a bit of the horse manure. She didn't seem to care. The more deviant, the better.

Her lips found his. They were soft. Fruity. Her tongue dipped into the valleys of his parched lips, filling them with much-needed moisture. She forced his lips open and let her tongue slip in and mingle with his.

The door swung open with a resounding boom when it hit the interior wall.

"Bastian?"

It took the little energy he had to turn his head.

"Tressa?"

"Well isn't this interesting?" Stacia pushed Bastian to the floor and took three steps back. She raised her hands in the air.

Tressa looked from Bastian to Stacia, trying to suss out what they'd been doing. It looked like they were kissing, but she couldn't be sure.

"One of my guards is a girl." Stacia's long braided ponytail swayed from side to side as she stepped backward toward her chair, reminding Tressa of the day Connor died.

"A woman," Jarrett said, "not a girl."

Henry wolf whistled behind them. "What about me? I'm nothing to sling mud at. Tell her who I am."

Jarrett elbowed Henry. "Shut up, boy."

Stacia's gaze fell on Henry. "You're the one who didn't kill anyone during the tournament, yet none of the other guards seemed to care. Curious. Why?"

"No reason," Jarrett said through gritted teeth. He looked at Tressa and Henry. "Stop talking to her, she's only delaying the inevitable."

Stacia's laughter could have cut holes in glass. "Inevitable?" She swirled around, then sat in her throne. "Let me guess. You're here to kill me." She faked a yawn, waving her hand in front of her mouth.

"No," Bastian said from the floor. "I am."

Tressa looked down at him, her stomach in knots. She wanted to be weak, to drop to the floor and cradle him in her arms, but she was too close to finishing what she'd worked so hard to achieve. She had to put Bastian out of her mind and focus. He was dead if she didn't.

She laughed again. "You're all so pathetic. A half-dead man. A girl. A boy. And," she looked at Jarrett, "I cannot figure out exactly what you are."

Before anyone could answer, Henry fell to the floor, grabbing his stomach. Jarrett and Tressa stood in front of him, but it wasn't enough to shield him from Stacia.

She bounded from her throne, her skirt swirling around her ankles. "What is this? What have you brought into my castle?"

Her words were drowned out by a hiss coming from the floor behind Tressa. Henry's body changed faster this time, scales and claws appearing as his flesh disappeared.

"A dragon?" Bastian said from the floor. "Like the one that came to

our village. They are also human. But the villagers...they..."

"What dragon?" Stacia snarled at him.

"A turquoise one. It was dangerous. But beautiful."

"What did you do with her?" Stacia's anger swept through the room.

"They cut up the dead dragon and ate it."

"The people of Hutton's Bridge ate my mother?" Stacia screamed. Her chin dipped down and her arms rose into the air. Her blue gown split in two. Her breasts spilled out the front, swollen and pulsing.

Tressa recoiled. She'd seen this once before. Instead of sticking with Jarrett and Henry, she ran to Bastian's side. She tugged on his arm. "You have to get out of here. Now."

Bastian looked up at her, one eye swollen, his lips caked in blood. "I can't. I'm too injured." He looked at Stacia's body convulsing. "What's going on with her?"

"She's turning into a dragon. It'll take a few minutes."

Bastian's eyes looked at Henry. "Him too?"

Tressa nodded. "Yeah. We can't fight her now. She's going to be too powerful. We have to leave."

"What are you doing here?" Bastian asked. "I thought you'd gone back to Hutton's Bridge. I went there for you. I slayed the beasts in the darkness of the mist. I took down the fog. I did it all for you. But you've been here?"

Tressa nodded. A tear slipped down her cheek. The screams of the two transforming into dragons echoed in the cavernous chamber. "I'm sorry I left you behind. I thought it would be easier for me to sneak in here alone."

"But your father said..." Bastian's throat rattled.

"Shh." Tressa placed a finger over his lips. "Don't talk. I need to get you out of here and healed."

Bastian's eyes tore away from hers. She followed his gaze to Stacia. Her limbs were no longer human like theirs. Blue scales sprouted along the lengthening appendages. Her nails grew into talons. Her long braid disappeared and a tail grew from the lower part of her back, just as dangerous as the braid she wielded.

"It's okay," Tressa whispered, "Henry is a dragon too."

"Is he powerful enough," Bastian said. "He looks like a boy."

Jarrett stood watch over his charge. Tressa could see the worry lines around his eyes. This wasn't what they'd planned. Killing Stacia in her human form would be much easier. As a dragon, she'd kill them all. Even Henry who hadn't ever fought as a dragon. She'd eat him alive.

"Go!" Jarrett yelled to Tressa.

"I can't leave Bastian," she called back over the deafening screams.

Jarrett's expression changed, only for a moment, from fear to sadness. He glanced down at Henry, then ran to Tressa's side. Bending down, he slipped an arm around Bastian's trunk. "Help me," he said to Tressa.

She wrapped her arms around Bastian, letting her sword clank to the floor. Jarrett still held his in his right hand. Together they pulled Bastian to his feet.

Tressa only came to Bastian's shoulder and Jarrett just past it. Still, together they were able to support his weight.

"Come on, just a few steps more." Tressa's hands trembled. Bastian had always been the one to support her. His strength was as much a part of him as his flaming red hair. She'd never seen him so defeated. So weak. "You can do this. I know you. You're the tough guy who doesn't let anyone tell him what to do."

She looked up and saw a tiny smile on his face. "I'll be okay."

"I know," Tressa said. "I know you will."

He smiled again and a small trickle of blood escaped from between his lips. "Funny, it doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would."

"Tressa!" Jarrett yelled. "Run!"

A warm sensation lapped over the arm she had wrapped around Bastian's back.

"No." It came out as a whisper, even though her heart was screaming. She pulled her arm away, letting Jarrett balance Bastian on his own.

Blood drenched her sleeve. Warm and sticky, it dripped to the floor, bead by bead, leaking Bastian's life with it. "No!"

The blue dragon, the one that had been Stacia, whipped its tail again, taking another strip out of Bastian's back. Henry still lay on the floor, convulsing, not yet a dragon, and no longer a young man.

Tressa ran to her sword, grasped it in her palm, and strode toward the dragon. It reared up on its two back feet, the talons leaving scratch marks in the marble floor. With two hands on the hilt of her sword, she stepped forward, bravery outweighing stupidity.

"Touch him again and I'll kill you," she shouted up at the dragon, unsure if Stacia could even understand her in this state. She glanced over her shoulder. Henry was still writhing on the floor, useless.

The dragon's nails click clacked on the marble tiles. It feinted to the left, then the right, easily avoiding every slash of Tressa's sword. It was faster and more graceful than she'd thought a beast of its size would be. Tressa stepped back, her chest heaving. She'd tire out faster than the dragon if she kept swinging recklessly. The dragon eyed her, as if it knew what she was thinking, then turned and strolled to Henry.

He'd finally settled into his dragon form. Golden scales covered his body, shimmering in the rising sunlight of mid-day. He stood on all

fours and shook his head back, just like Henry always did with his golden hair. Even as a dragon, he was a narcissistic fool.

Stacia's head tilted to the side. Tressa was almost fascinated by how their movements in dragon form echoed their human form, except that fear in her stomach kept her grounded. She looked behind her. Jarrett was running back into the room, Bastian nowhere to be seen.

"I left him in the hallway," Jarrett said, puffing for air.

"How is he?"

"Alive." His eyes met hers.

She understood it was all he was willing to offer. No promises.

"Good. Now let's end this before anyone else gets hurt."

Jarrett nodded. The two took off running toward the blue dragon. Stacia swung her neck around and blew a wall of fire at them. Tressa and Jarrett stumbled backward. Tressa slipped on the marble and fell to the floor.

Jarrett offered a quick hand. "You okay?"

"A little singed. Not bad. Again?"

He smiled. "Of course!"

Stacia turned around, her tail swinging from side to side. Covered in sharp spikes, it slammed on the floor in between them. The marble cracked, separating Tressa and Jarrett from each other.

Satisfied she'd neutralized Tressa and Jarrett for the moment, Stacia's head returned to Henry. He was still prancing around, acting like a show pony instead of a dragon bent on defeating his enemy. Her jaws opened wide, Stacia roared and bit Henry's neck, snapping it in two.

Henry listed, then dropped to the ground. Dead in mere seconds. The golden dragon's body didn't even twitch with life. His neck lay out to the side at an awkward angle and his tongue lolled outside his jaws.

For a moment, Tressa wondered if she'd miss the boy, but a hiss pulled her back to reality. Stacia faced them again, her slitted eyes glittering with bloodlust.

"What next?" Tressa asked Jarrett. For the first time, she honestly wondered if they'd lose. Maybe it wouldn't go the way of the old tales. The dragon had already killed Connor and Henry. Bastian lay dying in the hall. She and Jarrett were alone. Two swords against a dragon?

"We fight until we win," Jarrett said. "That's the only option." A bead of sweat trickled down his face, meandering over the sharp contours of his cheek, and nestling into his goatee. It was at that moment she realized how much he looked like his father.

Tressa's heart surged. She'd lost Leo and now his son stood in the path of death. All because of her. She made the only decision she could.

Tressa dropped her sword and raised her hands. It clattered to the floor, falling into the crevice created by Stacia's tail.

"I surrender."

Jarrett gaped at Tressa. "What are you doing?"

"We can't defeat her. I won't have you die in vain."

"This isn't your choice." Jarrett shook his head. His curly dark hair flopped over one eye. "Insane woman. I liked you better as a man." The pleading look in his eyes told her a different story. "We'll all die either way. Let me die fighting."

"No, Jarrett. Your father..."

"My father chose to fight for you. Bastian chose to fight for you. I choose to fight with you. There's a difference there. I'm not doing this for you, Tressa, I'm doing it with you."

"Jarrett..." Tressa glanced out at the hall where he'd dragged Bastian. She'd spent the last two years without a man in her life and now she had two.

It was less trouble without them.

Tressa clenched her hands into fists at her side. She took one step forward. Followed by another. And another until she stood next to Stacia's claws. "Run," she yelled to Jarrett. She didn't look back to see if he listened.

The turquoise dragon snorted, then scooped Tressa up.

The scales dug into her leathers, squeezing just hard enough for Tressa to feel lightheaded, but not enough to pass out. The room spun, marble and sunlight blended together in a carousel of color. Stacia's teeth glistened.

Tressa's mind wandered back to her childhood. She imagined sitting on Granna's lap, hearing a story about the world outside the fog. She never once believed she'd make it out, even though Granna said her destiny lay beyond the mist. If she had enough air to laugh, she would have. No matter, soon she'd be in the same place as Granna.

She laid her head on the top of the dragon's claw. It was almost over. She'd given Jarrett time to get away with Bastian. She couldn't save Connor, but she'd saved them. That had to count for something.

Inexplicably, the grip around her loosened. Tressa fell through the air, her arms flailing. Unable to catch her breath, gasping for the air she'd been denied, she braced for the landing on the marble floor. One

that would kill her faster than Stacia's teeth if her head or any vital organs absorbed the impact.

Her rear end landed on the seat of Stacia's throne just in time to have it knocked over by Stacia's tail. Tressa rolled with the chair, her fingers digging into the plush blue velvet of the armrests.

A roar rang out, followed by a low growl.

Two distinct dragon voices.

Tressa peeked up from underneath the upturned chair. A dark cobalt tail slithered past. She swallowed hard. Twice. Two dragons. One out to kill her. The other? Tressa could only hope it was help from Henry's country. Maybe since the fog fell, the other dragons were coming in to conquer Stacia. It was Stacia's greatest fear. Tressa hoped it was coming true.

She kept her belly low to the ground and shimmied across the floor, in the opposite direction of the two dragons, toward the door. "Jarrett," she desperately whispered. The two dragons caused such a cacophony, she was sure they wouldn't hear her.

"Over here!"

Tressa looked to her left. There he was. Still in the room. Bloodied and holding a sword. He skirted the side of the room and ran along the walls.

"You should have stayed under the chair. You're mad, woman."

She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him down to the ground on top of her.

"Don't you have magic? Can't you do something?" Tressa asked.

Jarrett shook his head. "Not enough to hurt a dragon."

The throne flew over their heads and smashed against the wall, splinters of wood raining on them. She laughed. "Guess it's a good thing I left the throne."

He brushed the sawdust off her face. "Like I said, you're mad."

"Me? You're the one still in here. I gave you the chance to get away."

"And I was just supposed to leave you there alone? I think not."

His face was only inches from hers and his body pressed down on hers. Tressa knew Bastian was right outside the door, dying. Two dragons were fighting in the same room. And yet, just for a moment, she was confused. "I think you can move now. We have to get out of here."

"I'm protecting your body with mine." He pressed down a little harder.

"Jarrett..."

An iron wine cup whizzed above their heads, slamming into the wall. It rolled along the floor, resting next to Tressa's head.

"Thirsty?" Jarrett asked with a smile.

Tressa rolled out from underneath him, surprised how easy it was. She could have done it at any moment, really. She crawled on her belly toward the door with Jarrett behind her.

Only after they slipped out into the hall, did she stand and run to Bastian. He sat on the floor, still conscious and breathing. "How are you?" Tressa smoothed back his red hair from his face.

"I'll be okay. A servant dropped a tankard of water when he saw what was happening in the throne room. He ran off. I was able to get to it and drink a bit. I'm still going to need some medical care, though." He attempted to smile.

"I know." She kissed his forehead. "Things aren't done in there yet."

"I'll be okay. Go."

Tressa gave him one more kiss on the head and ran back to Jarrett. She stood behind the huge, solid doors taking a glance into the room. Stacia's turquoise dragon scratched and bit at the cobalt dragon, who fought with intense vigor.

"Who is that?" Tressa asked Jarrett.

He shrugged and tossed his hands in the air. "He's a blue, so he's from here."

"He?" Tressa asked. She looked back into the room. "How do you know?"

"I don't. Just guessing." Jarrett looked puzzled. "There were only two dragons here, last we knew. Stacia and her mother."

"Then who is that?" Tressa asked.

"I don't know." Jarrett gazed at the two dragons. They fought with talons and teeth, neither willing to give an inch.

"I think he might need help." Tressa yanked Jarrett's sword out of his hand and ran back into the room.

"Tressa!" He yelled from behind, but she didn't look back. He wouldn't dare reenter the room without his own steel.

Tressa leapt over broken china and destroyed remnants of the finery Stacia had surrounded herself with. It was all in ruin now. She slowed when she reached the outer edge of the fight.

"Over here!" she yelled.

Both dragons turned toward her, fire in their eyes. She'd hoped the cobalt dragon would accept her help, but based on the anger in his eyes, she might have been wrong. The cobalt dragon swept at her with his tail, but instead of knocking her to the side, she grabbed on.

It felt like flying, so different than when Stacia had trapped Tressa in her grasp. Her brown hair blew out to the side as the tail swung her up and around. Her heart surged in her chest. Tressa gripped her sword with one hand, holding on for her life with the other arm.

"Help me!" she screamed at the cobalt dragon. He seemed to understand. The angle of his swing changed, sending her speeding

toward Stacia. Tressa flexed her bicep, readying herself. Flying toward Stacia, Tressa thrust her sword into the turquoise dragon's belly.

She reared back, screaming and clawing at Tressa and her cobalt dragon. Tressa felt the backward momentum switch to forward without warning. Again, her sword found its target.

Stacia stumbled backward. Her back crashed against a stained glass window, raining shards of every color onto the floor.

Dead.

The cobalt dragon backed up to an area clear of debris, lowered his tail, and waited for Tressa to carefully climb to the floor.

"Who are you?" she asked him. He just looked at her, his brown eyes blinking and silent.

"Tressa!" Jarrett ran into the room. "What is wrong with you? Stealing my sword? Riding a dragon's tail?"

The cobalt dragon lowered his head between Tressa and Jarrett, snorting a warm stream of air into Jarrett's face. He held up his hands and backed away.

"It's okay." Tressa patted the dragon on the snout. "Jarrett is my friend."

The dragon huffed again, then slowly moved up. Jarrett ran under and took Tressa in his arms. He spun her around. "You did it! I can't believe it!"

She laughed. Relaxed for the first time in months. Stacia was dead. The fog was down. Everything she'd needed to accomplish was done.

"But Henry..." Her voice trailed off as Jarrett set her down. "What will you tell his mother?"

Jarrett shook his head. "I'm not sure. She'll have my head for this. I may consider going into hiding. Perhaps I'll take over my father's profession. Do you think I could pass for The Man of Stealth and Romance?" He shot her a bright smile.

Tressa couldn't help but laugh again. "You are so much like your father. I think you just might pull it off. Or you could come with Bastian and me." She looked toward the hall. "After he's well, we'll be going..."

"Where?" Jarrett asked.

"I honestly don't know. We haven't had time to plan."

"And you're sure you want to be with him?" Jarrett asked, his eyes shining with sincere curiosity.

The dragon interrupted them, blowing another batch of smoke in Jarrett's face. He laughed. "I think the dragon wants you for himself."

Tressa placed her hand on the dragon's claw. "There is something familiar about him."

The dragon nuzzled her, his scaly skin scratching her arm.

Jarrett's eyes narrowed. "I know Stacia and her mother were the only dragons here until recently. When did you say your friend was killed?"

"A couple months ago." Tressa shuddered, refusing to relive that horrible day in her memory. She'd shut the door on it. Connor deserved to be remembered for more than that.

"And his body?" Jarrett wouldn't stop pressing for answers.

"Taken. By a set of dragon claws."

Jarrett walked closer to the dragon. It seemed more interested in him too. Jarrett held out a hand toward it, steady and sure. "Can you change into human form?"

The dragon's head hung down, its eyes downcast.

"You can't, can you?"

The dragon shook its head.

"Connor?" Tressa asked. She wasn't sure she could believe it or if she even wanted to believe it.

The dragon swung an eye toward her, then slowly nodded.

"Oh gods, Connor!" She threw her arms around the dragon's muzzle. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"He's in transition. It's only been a few months, so he cannot control the changing yet. Like Henry." Jarrett rested a hand on Tressa's back. "He will eventually be able to control it, just like Stacia and all of the other dragonlords."

"But how?" Tressa asked, stumbling backward. She still left a hand on Connor's muzzle, not ready to let go yet. "Connor was never a dragon. He was as human as me."

"The dragonlords have their ways. They can take someone like you or I, and change them. I don't know all the secrets of how it works, but I know it does. As an insider to the Yellow Throne I have seen things."

"And the people stand for this?" She thought of the regular people out in the streets, running their businesses, tending to their families. Their very lives were in danger.

"They don't know. In fact, you are one of few people who know that dragons can switch between human and dragon form."

Tressa staggered backward, letting go of Connor and distancing herself from Jarrett. "But the dragons. The people know they exist."

"They believe the dragons are protectors of the dragonlords. They do not know they are one and the same."

Tressa couldn't wrap her mind around it. She knew she'd had to keep Henry a secret from the others because of his mission to kill Stacia and take over the throne. She hadn't realized it was a secret she'd have to withhold from the rest of the world.

“No one can know. They fear the dragons, but the people love their leaders.”

Tressa snorted. “No one here loved Stacia.”

“No, but they loved her mother.”

“And Connor will one day learn how to turn human again on his own?”

Jarrett nodded.

“And he will be the same man as before?”

Jarrett stood still.

“Jarrett?”

“He will be ... different. How I cannot say. It is not the same for everyone.”

Tressa patted Connor on the nose again. “If you are in there and you can understand me, I want you to know that Bastian and I will find a way to help you. I promise.”

“That is not all,” Jarrett said.

Tressa turned to him. “What else is there?”

“Now that the fog has fallen, the other dragonlords will prepare for war.”

Her shoulders tensed up. “Why?”

“Because Hutton’s Bridge holds something they all desire.”

* * *

TRESSA LAID NEXT TO BASTIAN. She brushed his hair out of his eyes. “The physic said you’ll be feeling better in a couple of weeks. You sustained some serious injuries.”

“I’ll be fine in a day or two.” He tried to sit up, but instead he winced in pain.

“No, you’ll take the time to heal properly.” She pressed her body into his. “Everything else will fall into place if you let yourself heal.”

“And you? What will you do until then?”

Tressa took a deep breath, preparing herself to give him an answer she knew he wouldn’t like. “I have to go back to Hutton’s Bridge. There is some unfinished business that can’t wait.”

“What?”

She hesitated, knowing this answer would annoy him even more. “I can’t tell you.”

“It’s Jarrett, isn’t it?” He closed his eyes.

“Yes,” Tressa said. He’d explained to her about the danger awaiting her people – one they weren’t aware of – if they didn’t get to Hutton’s Bridge before the other dragonlords knew the fog was down.

“He wants you.”

Tressa didn’t immediately answer. She’d felt it was true as well.

Jarrett knew she was in love with Bastian, but it hadn't stopped him from letting her know he had feelings for her too. After Connor had flown out the window he'd destroyed with Stacia's body, Jarrett and Tressa took Bastian to the nearest physic.

While Bastian was being evaluated, Jarrett explained the danger of opening up Hutton's Bridge to the rest of the dragonlords. He pressed Tressa to travel with him back to her village. She'd told him about the dragon that had landed in Hutton's Bridge right before she, Bastian, and Connor left. She'd teared up thinking about Connor and then Jarrett had tried to kiss her. For a second, she'd allowed it before pulling away.

She gazed at Bastian. He didn't need to know specifics, but she couldn't lie to him. "He might, but it doesn't matter because we're finally together." He'd told her Vinya was dead. While she didn't celebrate the demise of the woman, she couldn't help but be relieved. It was one less obstacle in their way. "I'm also going so I can get Farah and bring her to you."

Bastian smiled. "Thank you."

"Sleep, now." She kissed him on the forehead and stood up.

"Tressa?"

"Yes?" She turned back to him at the doorway. He looked terrible – bruises, cuts, bandages everywhere.

"Be careful."

"I will. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Tressa, wait."

She looked back at Bastian, waiting for him to complete a yawn.

"Your father –" His eyes fluttered to a close, followed by a quick snore.

She smiled. She would see her father again before coming back into the city. And maybe even Nerak. First, Hutton's Bridge. They needed the honey.

She stepped out of the building and into the crowded city in the forest. Tressa shook her head at her foolishness. She'd thought escaping the fog was the only obstacle she had to overcome. Then it was killing Stacia. Every action she'd taken opened up her village and the people she loved to more danger. It occurred to her that she might never have a moment's rest again.

Jarrett stood not far away, leaning against a post for tying up horses. His dark skin framed his pearly smile. He bowed. "Ready, my lady?"

Tressa had changed into a dress provided by the wife of the physic. It was the first time she'd worn one in a long time and she wasn't sure she liked it. Tressa smiled and Jarrett helped her mount a horse he had procured for her. It pranced, kicking up dirt. Tressa's heart

fluttered. The horse trotted around and she held on tight. There was a first time for everything.

She pulled the skirt up, revealing a pair of riding breeches underneath.

Jarrett laughed. "You're always prepared, aren't you?"

"No, but that's never stopped me before."

They rode out of the city, hoping no one would notice Stacia was dead before they got back.

Epilogue

The wind caressed the underside of his wings as he flew through the afternoon sky toward the northeast. Away from the city. Away from civilization to the quiet of the forest near the mouth of a river. It had whispered its name to him. The Snake.

He understood the name. From above he saw how it wound through the forest. It was also dangerous and unforgiving. He'd nearly lost his most treasured possession the first time he'd found it. The object he carried with him was too precious to be swallowed by the river.

He'd hidden it in the forest.

With the others.

The horde of dragon eggs he'd stolen, one by one, and spirited away in the night to the nest he'd made for them in the hollow of an ancient tree.

Thirteen eggs.

When the change first happened, he thought he was dying. His skin burned like flames. It stretched and tore until he thought some unseen force was ripping him to shreds. It was more painful than the day the woman had killed him with her braid.

The bars disappeared for him, just as they did every time the woman visited and had her way with him.

He'd taken the egg in his mouth, for now that he was the same magical beast, he knew it for what it was. His seed had contributed to its being. Caring for it was all he knew.

The dragon, who had once been a man, wandered the dark cave, looking for others. All he found were dead men behind bars, their bodies wrapped around the eggs. No more alive than the straw nests built around them.

One by one, the cobalt dragon carried the eggs carefully between his jaws, away from the tunnels under the castle. His only instinct was to save them. Last, he took his egg to the hiding place in the forest. He would come back for them after he killed the female dragon who had raped him. Ruined him. Changed him.

Now she was dead. He was free.

He lay down next to the nest he'd built with twigs, leaves, and mud from the riverbank. His tail wound around the pile of eggs and he closed his eyes to sleep.

Until a cracking noise disturbed the quiet, starry night.

The story continues with...

Hunted
Dragon lands, Book 2

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HUNTED

by
Megg Jensen

Chapter 1

Udor watched in wonder, barely believing his eyes as the fog dissipated. "He did it," he said. Not to anyone in particular. The residents of Hutton's Bridge were as stunned as he. "That little bastard did it."

He would have put his hands on his hips, but those had disappeared in a mass of fat many years ago. He had been stuck in the fog, with a life of simple luxury and a wife who submitted to him. Children who had obeyed his every word. And when Sophia had died, he'd inherited the leadership of the town. He'd finally had everything he wanted.

Then those three had to go and destroy it. He'd tried to convince Tressa to stay behind. He'd wanted her body, yes, but more than that, he'd wanted to end the yearly trek into the fog. Odds were someone would eventually break through and ruin everything good in his cushy life as leader of Hutton's Bridge.

That day had come.

Chaos erupted amongst the villagers. Udor ambled through the masses, ignoring their pleas for guidance. Now they'd all want to leave. Now he'd have to deal with outsiders. Now his life would be changed for good.

Udor slipped into his cottage and locked the door, not caring his wife and children were still out there somewhere. He needed to be alone. He had to figure out how he was going to deal with this unexpected situation. He rested his hands on his ample stomach and sighed.

When Bastian had come back to town, claiming the world outside existed and was waiting for them, Udor found himself wishing he were a younger man. He could have challenged Bastian. Instead he'd just let the boy take his best men into the fog, armed to the teeth.

And then this. They did it. The fog was gone.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. "Yes?" He couldn't ignore it. Enough people had seen him go into his cottage. And he was still their leader, whether he liked the situation or not.

"It's me, Adam. We're back. Everyone wants you to come out and

speak."

Udor groaned, rising from the soft, plump chair. He straightened his shirt and rolled his eyes. "I'll be right out. Glad to hear you're back safely." And he was. Adam was their only skilled healer. Thankfully he'd come back to help his fellow villagers instead of taking off into the new world.

He flung the door open and strode out with a confident gait, though he had no idea what to tell them. He would let their expressions lead him. If there was one thing he'd learned over the years, it was to read the faces of his neighbors. It had helped him get his way many times. All he had to do was recognize their fears or desires and play upon them.

Except for that damned Sophia. He'd hated her arrogant behavior. As if being the last living witness to the day the fog fell meant something. It meant nothing. She knew nothing. The day she died had been the best day of his life.

Sophia had her final revenge, though. After Tressa had gone through the fog, the villagers had entered the cottage she'd shared with Sophia. The others in the village needed her resources. After the first day of rummaging through their things, the door no longer opened. For weeks, they tried. Eventually they'd given up. At least he'd found the book Sophia had kept hidden. The one that explained why their village had been doomed to be draped by fog.

Udor ascended the platform next to the rock where Sophia had lain not more than a moon ago. He wondered for a moment what she would have done in this situation. Probably encouraged everyone to run from town as fast as they could.

He looked out into the crowd. Women wrung their hands or snapped at their oblivious children. Men fidgeted with their farming implements, worried about the dead Adam's men were carrying back into town. "Where is Bastian?" Udor asked Adam.

"Taken by a group of soldiers. The rest are on their way here now."

Udor cursed under his breath. Why hadn't Adam mentioned that back at his cottage? Now he really had to think on his toes.

"My people," Udor said, raising his arms. "This is truly a joyous day. Our town has been liberated. The fog is gone. The world is ours to explore." He glanced at Adam out of the corner of his eye. Adam looked nervous, shifting from one foot to another. "But there are soldiers on their way to Hutton's Bridge. They may mean us harm. We must take up arms and prepare to fight."

The murmurs in the crowd turned to fear and anger.

"We don't know how to fight! And some of our men were killed in that forest." Hazel pointed to the place where Adam's men were dragging the dead back to the village. Her eyes darted over the bodies,

probably wishing one was her dead husband, Connor.

Udor shuddered. For years they'd given their dead to the fog on the other side of the village. Now that the fog was gone, what awaited them? A heap of decayed bodies and bones? He didn't want to be the one to find out.

Adam stood next to Udor. "There were beasts out there, but we killed them under Bastian's direction. The people coming now are just men. Like me. Like you." He pointed to a cobbler in the crowd. "We can talk to them. Reason with them. Fight only if we have to."

Udor wanted to nudge the redheaded physic away with his elbow. But the people were listening and nodding their heads. Adam's story held their ears, and because of his profession he held their hearts. Udor was impressed. Adam had never taken on any mantle of leadership in the past, but today he had the people of Hutton's Bridge in his hands.

"So put down your swords," Adam said. "Let's meet them with kind words and friendship first."

Everyone cheered at Adam's suggestion.

Udor held a snort inside. If these soldiers had taken Bastian, it was likely they had similar plans for the residents of Hutton's Bridge. He looked around, trying to think of a way to gain back their favor and restore common sense. Anything to wrest control away from Adam.

"Does anyone here remember me?" a voice called from the back of the crowd. All eyes swung to a man and a woman.

Udor's jaw dropped. It couldn't be.

"Jayne?" Adam stuttered. "Jayne, is that you?" He pushed his way through the crowd, running toward a woman who resembled his sister, gone long ago into the fog.

Udor knew the man next to her. Fenn. Tressa's father, Sophia's grandson. Both of them had entered the fog years ago. They were alive? How many others were out there? Had they all survived? He suddenly felt very sick to his stomach.

"We've come to help," Fenn said as Jayne fell into her brother's arms. "We have friends who can save you. The soldiers headed this way aren't kind. They are coming to destroy you."

"I don't understand," Adam stammered. "Why—"

Udor wanted to say something, but he was too stunned. He felt completely out of control. Damn those three for doing this to him. He liked life the way it was.

"The men coming from the east are going to kill you. I know because they tried to kill us too, but we escaped." Fenn walked amongst the people, his old friends. Even Udor had liked Fenn before he'd disappeared into the fog. He'd always felt they were kindred spirits. "Turn your eyes to the sky. Your saviors are coming."

Udor, along with all of the townspeople of Hutton's Bridge, looked up. He stumbled backward, overcome by the sight of dozens of red dragons flying toward them. His hands shook and his bowels turned to water. "No. No more dragons."

"It's okay, old friend." Fenn placed a hand on his arm. "They'll fly you away to somewhere safe. I promise."

Udor nodded, staring into Fenn's mesmerizing eyes. "Yes," he said, nodding. "We will go with you to your land of safety."

Udor felt the power coming back to him as the eyes of his people turned to him for comfort and leadership. "Don't be afraid. Fenn is an old friend. Many of you remember him as I do. We can trust him."

Udor swallowed the bile rising in his throat. It was the right decision...he hoped.

Chapter 2

The wind raced through Tressa's hair, tangling it with airy fingers. She tossed a smile to Jarrett, who rode a black horse next to her. "I love riding!"

"Better not smile too wide. You'll get bugs in your teeth." He laughed, his mouth open, followed by a quick cough and a slight gag. He spit to the side. "Damn bugs."

Adrenaline pumped through Tressa. She'd been afraid the first time she'd seen the horse, worried it would trample her bones under its hooves. Riding it was beyond anything she'd expected. If she closed her eyes, even for a moment, she had the sensation of flying. Then Jarrett would yell at her to open her eyes again.

He was too worried about her. Her instincts told her the horse wouldn't put itself in danger and she wanted to enjoy the ride. Once they arrived in Hutton's Bridge, she wouldn't have the luxury of a smile. There was little time to find a safe haven for her people before the other dragonlords investigated – if they hadn't already. She knew soldiers from Ashoom, where the blue dragons reigned, had to be close, if they hadn't found it already. She'd lived in the town for a long time without even knowing its proper name. Jarrett explained that everyone outside the Drowned Country called Ashoom by its proper name.

"Tell me again about your village," Jarrett said through gritted teeth.

"There are only a couple hundred people. I don't know for sure now. Since I left there was a plague and Bastian said many died in the battle to escape the fog."

"And the honey. Where do they keep the honey?" Jarrett had asked the same question over and over again.

Tressa always gave the same answer. "In the apiary. It's on the northwest side of the village near the fog. Well, where the fog used to be."

She still had trouble believing the fog was gone. It had been an indelible part of her life. She couldn't imagine Hutton's Bridge without it. Bastian had explained it to her as best he could, through his

injuries and the pain. He wanted to help, even if he couldn't ride out with them. Tressa's mind boggled at the thought of three magicians, bonded to trees, using their magic to keep the village surrounded by fog.

Months ago, she would have dismissed all of it as fairy tale. Now she'd seen too much. Anything was believable.

"Whoa," Tressa said, pulling on the horse's reins. The forest thickened up ahead. Trees grew together, tangled in knots, except for one spot where the branches were broken and sundered.

She pointed. "That's where Bastian hacked through the forest. Where we met Stacia's army. They were waiting for us."

"Stacia was with them?" Jarrett asked.

Tressa nodded at the man who had introduced her to a world of dragons, and fought to save her life from Stacia, the Queen of the Blue. "Yes. The Black Guard too. They said they were waiting for us. I'm not certain how they knew we'd be there."

"I'm sure Stacia has scouts waiting with messenger birds. As you know, it doesn't take long to get her soldiers out here."

Tressa's eyes swept over the forest, searching for any sign of life, friendly or otherwise. Bastian said he and the villagers had killed the beasts. Still, the memory of being hunted in the fog left Tressa's hands trembling.

Bastian had described the beasts. Their great height and massive bodies. Claws wide as tree branches. Blind, but able to mock their very words, drawing innocent people to their deaths. A cruel joke on the victim.

The haunted look in Bastian's eyes had told Tressa more than his words could. He was afraid of nothing. When they were first imprisoned in the forest, he fought bravely to set them free. Even when Connor was killed in front of him, Bastian remained strong. But when he talked of the beasts in the forest, his eyes filled with pain.

"We should head in," Jarrett said. "We don't want to waste any time." He leaned over and rested his hand on hers. "Are you okay?"

It wasn't until he touched her that she realized she was choking the pommel. "Yes." She released her grasp, letting the blood flow back into her palm.

Jarrett's hand lingered a moment longer than necessary. Tressa looked up at him. "I'm okay. Really."

"Then let's ride ahead. The sooner we get to Hutton's Bridge, the sooner we can help the villagers."

They entered the forest cautiously. The horses couldn't gallop now that the road was behind them, for fear of twisting a knee.

For eighty years the forest grew upon itself. Broken branches littered the ground. Ivy snaked around the bark, tying the entire forest

together in a bizarre organism pulsing with a stuttering, wounded heart.

Though she could see bugs and leaves and hanging moss, Tressa didn't feel any safer than she had the last time she traversed the forest with Bastian and Connor. Now she witnessed the twisted destruction of what once was, according to her departed Granna, a beautiful forest teeming with life. Butterflies fluttering in the breeze. Deer snacking on the grass. Tiny squirrels chattering to each other.

Granna had made it seem a wonderland.

No longer. The fog hadn't just stopped the children in Hutton's Bridge from leaving. It had wounded the forest's life force.

Jarrett whistled a tune under his breath. Not an upbeat ditty to distract them, but a low, keening melody.

"What is that?" Tressa asked him.

"An old song from my homeland. A lay."

"Lay?" Tressa's horse stepped carefully over a fallen tree trunk.

"A poem meant to be sung. I would sing," a wry smile graced his face, "but you don't want that. Trust me."

He continued whistling; Tressa listened intently. The notes soared over them, bouncing across the damaged forest. After the last note, Tressa asked, "What is it about?"

"It's the funeral lay, only sung in the Sands. We sing it to honor the dead. To remind us about life after the body dies."

"You believe in that?" Tressa asked him. "An afterlife?"

Jarrett's eyes widened. "You don't?"

"Until recently I didn't even believe in life beyond the fog." Tressa shrugged. Granna told her in the old days that their people worshipped the Holy Ones. After the fog fell, the children who were left behind prayed every day to them, seeking help. None came. Granna said eventually they gave up. Why worship a deity that didn't intervene? Some of the children had been afraid of repercussions, but when none came, they all gave up on the Holy Ones. All that remained was cursing in their name. "Anyway, it's beautiful."

"It felt appropriate," he said.

They rode on in silence. It seemed the proper response to the death lurking in the forest. Until the trees began to thin. Tressa strained to hear activity from the village. The sound of a woman singing while she worked in the fields. Or a cow lowing. Even the sound of the smithy, metal clanging on metal.

There was nothing but silence.

They broke through the final row of trees into Hutton's Bridge.

Jarrett looked around. "Where are the people of your town?"

Tressa slipped off the horse and walked to the village hall.

Empty.

The town square.

Empty.

House after house.

Empty.

She spun around, surprised to find Jarrett behind her. For a moment she'd forgotten him. Panic bubbled in her throat.

"They're gone. All of them."

Chapter 3

“*B*efore you ask me where they could have gone,” Tressa

said, holding up her hand, “I don’t have an answer. I’m just as stumped as you.”

Jarrett’s eyes swept the village. “Bastian said some of the villagers wanted to leave before he took the army into the fog. Maybe when the fog dropped, they took the opportunity.”

“No.” Tressa folded her arms across her chest. “Not everyone. I know at least one person who would never leave.” Without waiting for Jarrett, she marched across the village to the town hall. The biggest residence in Hutton’s Bridge, that of the head of the council, Udor.

She shuddered just thinking of the man who had tried to convince her to be a second wife to him. He’d promised protection. In exchange she’d have to whore herself out to him. Tressa had chosen almost certain death in the fog rather than give into his lecherous advances.

She pushed open the door to his cottage. “Udor?” She strode into the main room, expecting to see him lounging on a cushy chair, smoking a weed that made his attitude even more intolerable.

He wasn’t there. The chair was empty. Books sat on the shelf. Toys were scattered on the floor. Usually his home smelled of ham and stewed vegetables, but nothing permeated the air. Not even a stale whiff.

“I don’t understand.” She sank into Udor’s chair. Tressa pressed her nose into the fabric. Nothing. “It’s as if no one has been here in years.”

Jarrett closed his eyes and pressed his hands together. A faint glow emanated from his fingertips. It rose into the air, blue and yellow spirals twisting around each other until they merged into a brilliant orange dagger of light. Jarrett threw the dagger. It flew out the door and into the village.

“Come on,” he said, motioning for Tressa to follow.

She jumped out of the chair, only steps behind Jarrett’s black boots. They ran into the center of the village again. The magical orange blade spun in a circle three times, then darted from building to building, burning an amber circle above each doorway. With dizzying speed, the magic touched every building in Hutton’s Bridge. Then it

came to rest again in Jarrett's palm.

He clapped his hands together and it was extinguished.

"You can do this but you couldn't use your magic to fight Stacia?" Tressa asked.

"Trust me, when it comes to battle, my magic is useless. This is basic detection magic. My queen insisted I learn it when I became head of the guard. Nothing impressive." Jarrett said. "Now watch the circles."

Tressa trained her eyes on a set of doorways to the east. Each circle shimmered amber, then cooled to an ice blue. "What does that mean?" She looked at Jarrett, his eyes narrowed and his lips set tightly together. He didn't respond. "Jarrett?"

"How many in your village can use magic?"

"None."

He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked Tressa straight in the eyes. "That can't be right."

"It is. We all believed magic wasn't real. Of course, there were stories, but it was all in our imaginations. I didn't witness magic until I stepped inside the fog."

Jarrett's grip tightened. "Are you sure? Because this is telling me something far different."

Tressa gazed at her village again, not seeing anything different than before. "What do you see that I don't?"

Jarrett sighed. He stroked the small black goatee on the tip of his chin. "If my magic is right, and it's never wrong, your entire village has been cleansed."

It was as if he were speaking another language. Hutton's Bridge was empty, but it certainly wasn't any cleaner than normal. "Is that a magic term?"

He nodded, still messing with the goatee.

"Well?" She was getting impatient. She took another look at the cottages and the spots she'd seen the magic touch. Nothing. But Tressa knew something was amiss. It wasn't just the missing villagers; it was the lack of smells. The stillness. They wouldn't have all left. Not so quickly. And Udor? Never.

"A few hundred people, right?" he asked.

Tressa nodded.

"Well," he continued, "people are constantly thinking. And those thoughts don't just happen and disappear. The stronger the thought, the longer it lingers. Something dramatic must have happened for your villagers to leave so quickly. Yet, there are no thoughts left. Someone cleansed the village."

"So if I'm thinking something, you can read my mind with your magic?" She suddenly felt uncomfortable, remembering those few

times she'd thought of him as more than just a friend. When she'd enjoyed his kiss after killing Stacia. A blush swept over her neck and cheeks, dousing them in pink. He wasn't supposed to know. She still loved Bastian. Appreciating another man didn't change that.

"No," Jarrett reassured her. "It takes preparation. You saw what I did in that cottage. Have you ever seen me do that around you?" Jarrett's brown eyes locked on hers.

She hadn't, but she knew so little about magic. He could be lying.

"I'm not lying to you."

"Ah ha!" Tressa waved a finger in front of his face. "I was just thinking you might be."

Jarrett rolled his eyes and laughed. "Believe what you will. I have never lied to you and I never will. It isn't in my nature. The longer you know me, the more you will see that is true." He turned toward the cottages, a grave look on his face again. "Now let's figure out what happened to your villagers."

"How?" Tressa asked.

Jarrett poked his head in the nearest doorway, then looked at her again. "I'm not sure."

Tressa joined him inside the dark cottage. Much like Udor's, it seemed no one had packed for their journey. It was as if they'd all disappeared. Clothes remained in baskets. Bread and mead sat undisturbed on the table. One basket overflowed with clean nappies.

Tressa rubbed the soft fabric between her fingers. So clean and pure. Her heart ached a little, thinking of the babies she had so desperately wanted with Bastian. "No good mother would leave without nappies for her baby."

"I agree. Or food for the journey." Jarrett stood with a hand on the open pantry door. It was stocked full of jam, jellies, spices, and jerky. "There's no honey in here." He rattled jars aside, rummaging through the shelves.

"Why are you so obsessed with finding honey?" Tressa asked, folding the nappy and placing it carefully back on the pile. "Don't you have honey elsewhere?"

"Yes, we do, but honey from Hutton's Bridge is...special."

"Why?"

Jarrett closed the door. "There is magic in the honey of Hutton's Bridge."

"I've told you a hundred times, Jarrett. There hasn't been any magic in Hutton's Bridge since the fog fell. We don't believe in it, much less know how to use it."

Jarrett's head perked up. His eyes searched the room. His hands trembled. "That's not entirely true." He rushed out the door, leaving Tressa standing in the center of the cottage confused.

She chased after him. His dark hair retreated around a corner. Tressa followed. Not that there was much danger of losing him. This was her home. She ran past the tavern and the smithy, around another corner and through the center of the village, following his footprints in the dirt.

It occurred to her that his were the only footprints. The people, the smells, and even their footsteps were gone. She looked up, searching for Jarrett, but he'd left her sight. Pausing, she listened and heard his boots stomping on the ground to her right. She raced around the side of a cottage.

Jarrett stood not far away. His hands were pressed together again, the familiar strands of blue and yellow emanating from his fingertips and swirling into a flaming orange.

It wasn't the magic that gave her pause this time. He was standing in front of her cottage.

Chapter 4

“*I* was drawn here,” Jarrett said. “Can you tell me anything about this cottage?” The strands of magic exploded in a bright yellow flash and surrounded the walls. The glow pulsated, engulfing Tressa’s home in a fire made of magic.

Tressa didn’t respond.

“It’s strange,” Jarrett said, running his hands over the glow. “I hadn’t felt anything. The village was empty of all magic. Then it was if there was a hard tap on my shoulder and I followed the feeling here. Odd. So, so odd.”

He jiggled the handle. “The door won’t open.” Jarrett stepped backward, then heaved his shoulder into the solid wood. It didn’t budge. He looked over his shoulder at Tressa. “You have a strange look on your face.”

Tressa composed herself. “I do?”

“Who lived here?” Jarrett asked.

Tressa walked past him and into the cottage. “I thought you said the door wouldn’t open?” Her cottage had been ransacked by the other villagers, as she’d suspected. Still, some of things she remembered remained.

Jarrett followed her into the cottage. “Is this where you lived?”

Tressa nodded. “Up until a few months ago, it was all I had ever known. I lived here with my Granna, my great-grandmother. I thought the rest of my family was dead.” She choked back a few tears. “Granna died just before I was sent into the fog. She had been our leader. She chose me to go.” Tressa paused. She hadn’t known Jarrett long, but he already knew so much about her. Telling him the one thing she’d kept from everyone else seemed natural now. “She told me she knew I’d succeed because she’d seen it.”

“Seen it how?” he asked gently, placing a hand on her arm.

Tressa shrugged. “I don’t know. Granna said it was some kind of magic. I dismissed it as the ramblings of an old woman.” She bent over, running her hand along the headboard of Granna’s bed. “Maybe it wasn’t...”

“It wasn’t,” Jarrett said. “Something is being protected here. I can

feel it.”

“Then why didn’t the ones who—what did you call it? Cleansed? What about the ones who cleansed Hutton’s Bridge? Why didn’t they see this?”

“I don’t know.” He walked around the small cottage. “You didn’t own much, did you?”

“No one in Hutton’s Bridge had a lot. Resources were tight. We had to reuse everything we could. I’m surprised they didn’t repurpose everything I owned after I left.”

“I’d like to say they were fools, but it makes sense. I can’t even imagine living like that. Feeling trapped all the time. It’s a wonder your village even survived. Many might have rebelled or killed each other.”

“My Granna was thirteen when the fog fell. She became the leader and under her guidance the village stayed strong.” If Tressa stared hard enough, she could almost make out Granna sitting in her rocking chair in the corner. She wished she could reach out and touch her again, if only for a moment.

Jarrett turned around, a quizzical look on his face. “What do you mean she became the leader? What about the adults? Why would they let a thirteen-year-old girl make the decisions?”

Tressa hesitated. So he didn’t know. Why would he? No one would. As far as they knew, Hutton’s Bridge was filled with dead bodies. “When the fog fell, the adults went missing. Granna woke up in the morning to the sound of a baby crying. When she left her cottage, she couldn’t find any adults. Neither could the other kids. They were alone, trapped inside the fog.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Jarrett continued to look in every corner. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Bastian mentioned that he understood our past better now, but we didn’t get a chance to talk before you and I had to leave for here. When we get back to Ashoom, perhaps he’ll have more to tell us.” Tressa watched Jarrett poke and prod her cottage. She wondered what he was looking for, or if he even knew.

He threw his hands up and sat down. “I can’t find anything here. But I can promise you that this cottage is protected by a very powerful magic. There might be something hidden here. Someone is trying to tell us something.”

Frustration welled up in Tressa. She wanted to go back in time, just a few months, and question Granna about her visions. She wanted to follow Granna one of the nights she slipped out of the cottage, taking her little owl Nerak with her. Or ask Granna to tell her about magic instead of rolling her eyes as if she knew it all.

“I don’t know what it is.” Tressa sighed, giving up. “Do you want

me to take you to the apiary now?"

Jarrett stood up. "Yes."

For a fleeting moment, Tressa could have sworn she really did see Granna sitting on the chair, smiling and braiding her hair. She blinked a few times and Granna was gone. Tressa's heart ached, every beat pulling her further away from her memories.

In silence, Jarrett followed Tressa out of the cottage and across the village square. The beehives were on the far side of the village, away from the cottages and buildings. Tressa hadn't been there much. Only a few people had tended to the bees, wearing the veil that protected their eyes and using the long scraper to free the honey from the comb. Everyone else was warned to stay away. The bees could be dangerous in the wrong hands. Worse, if a bee stung a villager who was allergic, little could be done to save them.

"If you're looking for something specific, I'm not sure I can help you. I don't know much about the bees. Or the honey, for that matter." Tressa led Jarrett around the back of a barn to an open area where the bees were kept.

She stopped short and he bumped into her. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's gone. All of it." She clearly remembered hives hanging from the trees. Now, there was only an open grassy area. Tressa spun around, her arms hanging down. "I don't understand."

"Nothing is right here," Jarrett said. He reached out, taking one of her hands in his. "I promise I will help you find out what happened in your town."

"And I have to find my people."

An ear-piercing screech ripped through the air.

"Not again," Tressa said. Jarrett tugged on her hand and they ran into the trees at the edge of the forest. Peeking out, Tressa could see a red dragon, claws bared, circling high in the sky over her town. It swooped from side to side, huffing gusts of air from its nostrils.

"What is that doing here?" Jarrett asked.

"As if I know." She squeezed Jarrett's hand with an iron grip. He didn't pull back.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised the Red would send a scout. But how could they have known so quickly?" Jarrett placed his free hand on Tressa's shoulder.

She took a deep breath, attempting to steady her shaking limbs. Dragons. Again. Couldn't they just leave her alone?

The dragon landed in the town square, in the same spot where Stacia's mother had landed just before she died. Tressa remembered the awe she'd felt that day. Now she harbored nothing but fear for the beasts. Except the cobalt dragon. The one she thought might be Connor.

The red dragon's snout snuffled along the ground, its breath kicking up dirt in its wake.

"It's not a sentry. It's hunting." Jarrett said, his words tumbling out so fast Tressa could barely understand him. "Climb now." He boosted Tressa into the nearest tree, her arms flailing as she reached for a branch.

They huddled together in the upper boughs of the tree, Jarrett's arms around Tressa's waist. "Don't move," he whispered in her ear. "Dragons have a good sense of smell, but their visual acuity is even sharper. If it doesn't see us move, it's possible it will miss us."

Tressa watched the dragon through leaves and branches. Its claws dug into the grass. Its tail flicked across the ground slamming into the sides of cottages, leaving dents in its wake. The dragon's chin lifted, and its jaws closed. A small hooting noise came from between its teeth.

"It sounds like an owl," Jarrett said. "I've never seen a dragon do that before."

Tressa nodded, too scared to say anything. She had heard that noise before too. Her little owl friend Nerak had hooted to her in the forest when it was still shrouded in fog.

Another red dragon descended from the sky, landing next to the first. They nuzzled.

"Mates," Jarrett whispered. "And I'm surprised they didn't sniff out our horses and eat them."

Tressa nudged him with her elbow. She didn't need a running commentary. Jarrett went silent, at last. They watched the two dragons wander around Hutton's Bridge, sniffing at the ground and the cottages. After a while, they took flight, their wings spread out so much they blocked the sun for a few breaths.

"It's okay to go back down now," Jarrett said. "Let's grab the horses and get out of here."

"We should go to Ashoom and ask for help." Tressa looked toward the east. Bastian was still there. Injured. Waiting for her.

"There's no one there who can help us," Jarrett said. "If we go to my home in the Sands, I can almost guarantee a small army."

Tressa sighed. She'd have to choose again. Months ago she'd left Bastian in the forest with their parents, and snuck off into the town seeking to destroy Stacia. Leaving him had been hard, but it paid off. Stacia was dead. Now she struggled to make the choice again.

It had been a long time since she'd had a moment alone with Bastian. Though she wanted, more than anything, to sit and have a long talk with him, she knew helping her people was more important. She couldn't let her own feelings get in the way of what was right.

She thought of Bastian lying injured, his wounds gaping and

crusted with blood. His mouth pulled into a smile for her benefit. Perhaps he'd heal better without her around. He wouldn't need to pretend he was okay for her sake.

Tressa steeled her heart. "Let's go, then."

"And what about Bastian?" Jarrett asked.

"Bastian needs time to heal, whether I'm there or not," Tressa said, the truth catching in her throat. The veracity of her statement wasn't easy to swallow. "We will ride to the Sands and ask your people for help."

"If you're sure," Jarrett said. His eyes were warm, caring. Tressa knew he'd do as she asked. All she had to do was insist they return to the castle. To Bastian. He would follow without question.

But no. She'd made her choice.

Tressa nodded. "I am."

They made for the horses they'd hidden in the forest. Tressa ventured one last glance at her empty town. Her past had been erased. Her new life held only uncertainty.

"We have to hurry," Jarrett said, mounting his horse. "I want to get to the first oasis by nightfall. Especially if those dragons decide to come back. We need to get out of here."

Tressa dug her heels into her horse's sides. "Let's go."

Chapter 5

“You must wake up. Now.”

Delicate fingers dug into Bastian’s shoulders. He just wanted to sleep. The last few months he’d seen too many injuries. Too many battles. But no one seemed to care. Someone always wanted to tell him where to go. Who to be.

“Wake up!”

The accent was strange to him. Lilting and high. Obviously a woman. But one laced with intense vigor.

As Bastian raised his arm to shoo her away, teeth sank into the tender skin of his arm.

“Ow!” Bastian sat up, his eyes open wide. A woman stood in front of him. Or maybe she was a girl. He wasn’t sure. Her black cloak hid any clues. Her golden hair spilled down to her shoulders in a mess of waves. Bright blue eyes gazed at him intensely. “Who are you?”

“I’m Elinor.” She yanked on his arm, but she was too diminutive to budge him. Her fingers couldn’t even wrap around his forearm. “Do as I say or die.”

Bastian laughed. “You and what army?”

She glared at him. “Flex your stupid muscles. Well, do it.”

Bastian did as she asked and was surprised to find his arms no longer hurt. He ran his hands over his stomach and chest. No wounds. No blood. No bandages. “What happened? I was injured. Severely.”

“And now you’re not. Stop asking questions and get up. You have to get out of Ashoom. Your friends are gone and I can take you someplace safe.”

He swung his legs over the side of the table and stood up. He felt remarkably well considering the injuries he’d sustained after fighting the beasts in the foggy forest outside of Hutton’s Bridge, and then being dragged back to the town by the Black Guard. “How long have I been out?”

“Days.” She shot a furtive glance toward the door.

“What?”

“You ask too many questions. If you close your lips and do as I say, you probably won’t die.” She slipped her hand in his and tugged him

toward the back of the room.

Bastian sighed. He was so tired of being dragged and pulled everywhere. "I'm not leaving. Tressa should be back soon and we—" He tugged his hand away from Elinor's.

She planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I healed you at great cost to my own strength. Don't be an ass by rejecting the gift. The men of the Black Guard know what happened to Stacia. They know you are missing. They won't stop until they find you and kill you. Slowly. Marden isn't known for his compassion."

Bastian remembered Marden. The largest man he'd ever laid eyes on. No, he didn't want to meet him in battle. Bastian was sure of his own strength, but against a man like that he stood little chance.

"Then where should I hide? I don't know this town."

Elinor puckered her lips and blew an errant strand of hair off her face. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. Come with me and you'll be safe."

Bastian took a step back. "Why should I trust you? Maybe you're just leading me to him."

She stomped one tiny booted foot on the floor. "Fine. If you want to be an idiot, I can't change that. They warned me. They said, 'Elinor, he's the least intelligent of the three. Don't waste your time with him. Try to find one of the other two.'"

"What are you talking about?"

Elinor scooted a chair in front of Bastian. She climbed atop the seat, looking him straight in the eyes. "I am an initiate healer of the First Order of the Healer's Guild, the most skilled in recent memory, though I still have many mysteries to learn. I can heal the most grievous injuries with the lightest touch of my hand. But I can only do it once every moon. I used it up on you. So if you want to repay me by acting like an imbecile, I will be teased, and forced to leave my order. It isn't just the skill that is valued. It's the judgment in using it properly. I have spent all eighteen years of my life cloistered with the other healers. You were my first test. A rather successful one at that."

"What will you have me do? If I follow you, that is?" Bastian swallowed, suddenly nervous around this wisp of a woman. He was strong, but she had powerful magic.

"I will protect you, of course. I'll find a place for you to hide until things calm down here in Ashoom. Until a new leader steps forward and claims the Blue Throne. Without one, we are vulnerable to the other dragonlords." She clambered off the chair and smoothed out her black gown. "But we're wasting time. You must follow me. I will not have my first success die only moments after I've healed him."

"Thank you." Bastian stuttered a bit. It was disconcerting how someone so small could set him off kilter.

Elinor shoved a black cloak at him. "Cover your hair. Not many giant redheads in Ashoom. You're too easily recognizable."

Bastian slung the cape around his shoulders and pulled the hood over his head.

"Hold your wrists together."

Bastian did as he was told.

Elinor tied a rope around his wrists and before he could protest, she'd knotted the rope so tightly he couldn't move.

"Hey!"

"It's part of the disguise." She waved her hand and gestured for him to follow. "I don't want a month's worth of healing to go to waste. Now follow me. Stay close."

Bastian shrugged and followed the girl, woman, whatever she was, out of the back of the cottage. It was just like when he'd escaped with Tressa after finding Connor missing.

Tressa. She'd be back soon with Jarrett and he'd be gone. How would she find him? He looked over his shoulder at the crowded street. People were agitated and angry. He pulled farther back into the hood. Better to be alive in hiding than for Tressa to find him dead at the hands of her former mates in the Black Guard.

Elinor pulled a bundle of herbs from a pocket inside her cloak. She waved her fingers over the herbs and muttered a series of incomprehensible words. The herbs began to smolder.

Smoke wafted into his nose, stifling his breathing and choking him. Bastian coughed and held an arm over his face. "What is that?"

"Lavender and oregano. I'm cleansing the air around you as we walk through the town. Everyone will stay clear, and no one will suspect you are anything other than a diseased wretch." She waved the herbs in front of his face again, her blue eyes unflinching.

"They will because it reeks," he said, muffled through his arm.

"No. This marks you as ill and me as your healer. No one will want to tempt the fate of the gods by coming any closer than they have to." She tugged hard on the rope leash. "Come on."

Bastian stumbled and followed her down the street. She spoke true. Everyone kept far away from them. A few made strange gestures with their hands and some spat on the ground while cursing. Elinor was right. They quickly left the town without any interference. He just hoped she was exactly what she'd told him and that he wasn't being led into another trap.

Chapter 6

After they left the town, Elinor smothered her smoldering herbs and untied Bastian's hands. She commanded he keep the hood on in case they came across anyone who was looking for him.

Bastian hadn't been this way before. Only northwest to Hutton's Bridge. His head spun. Earlier in the day he'd marched out of his town into the fog, killed the beasts, and reasoned with the woman in the tree, only to get captured by Stacia's men. Again. Despite all of his brawn and bravery, he couldn't remain free.

Women kept saving him. First Tressa. Now this Elinor girl. It was embarrassing.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"Somewhere safe." Elinor fell back, walking next to Bastian. They were no longer healer and patient, but equals.

Bastian looked down. Where he was too tall, she was too short. A tiny thing, the top of her head barely reached his elbow. "I think it's okay to tell me now. No one is around to hear you."

Elinor stopped and yanked on his sleeve. "Fine. We're going to a cave along the Snake River. It's just to the north of the three trees that grow as one. Past the stream that leads into the river. Does that help? Do you know where we're going now?"

Bastian glared at her, irritated. "Yes, I do." He didn't, but there was no reason to tell her that. She didn't need to know he'd never travelled anywhere. "I'm very familiar with that area."

Elinor slapped her hand over her mouth, stifling a laugh.

"What?" Bastian asked. His irritation was rapidly growing into annoyance.

"Make sure you take a right at the cow." She laughed again, this time not even pretending to cover it up.

"Funny. Very funny." It wasn't. Not at all. But she'd healed his injuries and led him to freedom, so he would keep his opinions to himself.

"I know you've never been outside of your little town or mine."

Bastian raised his eyebrows.

"Hutton's Bridge is a bit of a legend to us, too." Elinor plucked a

white daisy from the ground and twirled it between her fingers. “I grew up thinking it was a town of mystery and enchantment. A fairy tale. I mean, the fog has always been there. Impenetrable. How could anyone live inside that? We thought everyone was dead.”

Bastian shook his head. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? We believed the rest of the world was gone. Only death awaited us. Every year, our elders sent three into the fog. No one ever returned. Not one.”

“Yet you kept trying.” She sighed. “You must have a very strong community. Many people here would give up. They wouldn’t believe. Your people must be so brave.”

Bastian hadn’t thought of it that way before. Sending three into the fog had felt desperate. Villagers rarely volunteered. It wasn’t like they were clamoring to leave. At times, they were sent at sword-point. Within a few days, life in Hutton’s Bridge would go back to normal. The belongings of the people who entered the fog were distributed to those who needed them most. “We weren’t any different than your people. We did what we needed to survive.”

Elinor nodded. She tossed the daisy into the air. It landed on the ground, nestling among the blades of grass that reached up to their ankles. They walked in silence for a while longer.

Trees stretched into the sky, covered in green leaves swaying in the gentle breeze. It was far different from the forbidding forest outside of Hutton’s Bridge. This one didn’t harbor monsters waiting to suck the marrow from his bones. Magical guardians didn’t hide in the trees, holding the fate of hundreds in their hands. Here, Bastian could almost appreciate the beauty. He just wished Tressa was there with him, not off on some errand with that man from the Black Guard.

Yes, Jarrett had helped to keep her safe. He’d fought bravely against the dragon when Bastian was wounded and left for dead in the hall. But Bastian bristled, knowing that Jarrett was interested in Tressa.

“We’re almost there,” Elinor said. “You can hide here until things calm down in Ashoom. Then I’ll find a way to get you out of the Drowned Country. Probably by river. Can you sail?” She looked up at him with blue eyes large and round.

“No, I can’t. I’ve never even been near a body of water bigger than a well.”

“Of course not.” Elinor blushed. “I wasn’t thinking. Well, it’s not so hard. You’ll get used to it quickly.”

Bastian appreciated her help, but he wasn’t sure she’d thought her plan all the way through. “Where should I sail to?”

“You can sail the Snake south to one of the major ports. From there you can hire a ship and go anywhere you want.” She paused, laying her hand on the bark of a nearby tree. She pressed her ear to a

knothole.

Bastian pretended to look at a rock. He wanted to look at anything other than Elinor. If she hadn't saved his life, he might have questioned her sanity.

Elinor pulled away from the tree and smiled. "Yes, there's a cave up ahead. It will do well to hide you."

"Did the tree tell you that?" Bastian asked, a smirk crossing his face.

Elinor crossed her arms under her chest. It was the first time Bastian realized she had one. An ample set of breasts had been hiding under her cloak the whole time. He forced himself to look into her eyes again. "Just because you don't understand, doesn't mean you should tease." She glared at him. "And, yes, the tree did tell me there's a cave ahead. It said something about a family living there, but I have to doubt that. There are no families in this part of the forest. Sometimes the memory of trees is polluted by time."

"Lead on, then," Bastian said. His wounds were healed, yes, but his stamina hadn't returned. He needed a rest, and a quiet cave would be perfect. Maybe even a nap.

Elinor turned to the north. "It's not far now. I know we've been walking a long time, but we're almost there. I promise." She flashed him a toothy white smile.

"When we get there, will you be leaving?" Bastian wasn't afraid to be alone, but night would be falling soon. It might not be safe for her to travel in the forest. She'd taken such good care of him. It was right to ask her to stay.

Elinor looked up into the canopy. "The sun is almost ready to set. It would be wise to remain here. Do you mind?"

Bastian shook his head. "Of course not. Maybe you can tell me more about the port. Where can boats take me once I'm on them? I don't want to go too far away. Tressa said she'd be coming back for me. If I can't wait in Ashoom, I want to make sure there's a way she can find me."

"I'll watch for her," Elinor said. "If she comes back, the guard will kill her. It is certain. Soon everyone will be looking for the girl who dresses as a boy. I'll tell her where you've gone. I have friends in the ports who can pass on a message to her. You will be reunited. But if you act foolishly, you'll be killed, and you'll never see her again. You have to trust me."

"You've brought me this far," Bastian said. "I will do as you say."

Elinor gasped in relief. "Look ahead. Do you see that copse of trees there? It's guarding the entrance to the cave. We'll be able to slip in on the other side. Come on!" She grabbed his hand, propelling him forward.

Together they ran to the cave, eager to sit down and rest. Bastian hadn't asked, but he hoped she'd thought to bring some food. Perhaps there was some hiding in that cloak of hers.

The dark mouth of the cave opened wide, just as she'd said, on the other side of the trees. They stumbled inside, smiles on both of their faces. Bastian rested his hand on a large rock near the mouth of the cave. He sat down, his back against it.

"What?" Elinor said, staring into the cave in horror. "There is a family here." She took a few steps back, her hand covering her mouth. Her eyes were large, her face pale.

Bastian's stomach turned. What had she seen? Whatever it was, it couldn't be worse than the giant beasts he'd fought in the forest outside of Hutton's Bridge. "What do you see?" He squinted into the darkness, not seeing anything of interest other than a bunch of boulders.

"The cave." Elinor pointed, her hand shaking. "It's filled with eggs."

Chapter 7

Bastian dropped his fists and laughed. “You’re scared of a bunch of eggs?” He sauntered back into the cave and sat down on one. Hard ridges poked through his pants, but he gritted his teeth and pretended to be comfortable. All day Elinor had told him what to do. He wanted to show her he could make decisions too.

“Bastian, don’t.” She took a step backward, then another.

He rapped on one of the eggs. “See, it’s fine. Nothing to be afraid of. We can sleep in here just like you suggested.”

“It’s not the eggs I’m afraid of.” She retreated a bit farther away from the mouth of the cave.

“Elinor, my friends killed Stacia. She’s not coming here for eggs. And they haven’t hatched. They’re harmless.” He took a glance around the cave at the blue eggs. Though they were all of equal size, each of them was a little different. Slight variations of blue, but each eggshell had unique veined patterns.

Elinor finally stood still. “No, someone will. Stacia wouldn’t have kept her eggs out in the forest. It’s too dangerous. Too easily discovered.” She shook her head, her eyes wide. “Someone, or something, brought them. We’re not safe here.”

Bastian was about to respond with more reassurances, when a scabbling at the back of the cave gave him pause. Cautiously, he stood up and turned around.

“Hello?” he called out.

“Bastian,” Elinor hissed. “Get out of there now! The mother will come back for these eggs! We don’t want to be here when that happens.”

He ignored her pleas. He reached to his hip, but his sword wasn’t there. He cursed in his head. He hadn’t even thought to ask Elinor about his steel before they snuck out of the town. Now he stood defenseless against whatever was in the back of the cave.

Bastian walked backward, closing the distance between him and Elinor while giving the mystery noise in front of him a wide berth. He should have listened to her in the first place. His attitude would get him in trouble again.

Her fingers brushed his and Elinor yanked him back. She peeked around his side and together they peered into the dank cave, stinking of mold and stifling air.

"It's too late to run," he told her. He refused to turn his back on a potential enemy.

She punched him. "I know that. If you would have listened to me earlier we'd already be gone. If you are gravely injured, I can't heal you again. Not for another moon. I can bandage you and give you the proper medicines and salves, but I cannot bring you back from the brink of death yet. You'd better hope you made the right decision."

They stood together, unsure whether to flee or wait to see what it was. Silently, they agreed to stand their ground. Another set of scabbled pebbles caused Bastian's heart to race faster. Sweat pooled around the collar of his shirt and his fists involuntarily clenched and unclenched.

"Did you hear that?" Elinor asked.

Bastian didn't hear anything.

Elinor stepped out from behind him. Bastian reached out to grab her, but his fingers only grazed the edge of the hood on her cloak. "Damn woman." He grumbled and took off after her.

Elinor disappeared into the dark recesses of the cave. Bastian hesitated where the light marked the edge of the darkness. He'd never been afraid of the dark, but lately too much had hidden in the places light didn't touch. Destruction had hidden there. Death.

Bastian swallowed the rock in his throat and stepped into the darkness after Elinor. Following her soothing voice, he made his way to her.

"Bastian, I can't pick him up. He needs help." Elinor pleaded with him.

Bastian made his way to her and knelt, pebbles and rock stabbing his knees through his breeches. "What is it?"

"Not what, but who," Elinor said. "It's a man. He's injured and needs our help. Oh, if only I hadn't wasted all of my healing on you or I could help him too. I didn't bring any poultices or extra herbs."

Bastian fumbled in the dark until he found Elinor's small hand. She guided him to the body. Bastian heaved the man over his shoulder.

Bastian rose to his feet, encumbered by the listless body. He followed Elinor's voice back to the sunlit portion of the cave, though the light was fading fast. Bastian wound his way around a few of the eggs to a clear patch where Elinor had spread her cloak on the ground.

Bastian laid the man down gently.

"He's naked," Elinor said, concerned. "Take off your cloak and cover him."

Bastian draped the cloak over the sandy-haired man's body. Only then he looked at the man's face.

It couldn't be.

He was dead.

Bastian had seen him die.

Elinor smoothed back the hair draped over his face and Bastian was certain.

"Connor."

Elinor looked up in surprise, her eyes wide and her little pink mouth open. "You know him?"

Bastian nodded. He fell to his knees. He hadn't thought he'd ever see his best friend again. Tressa had muttered something about Connor before he passed out in the medical ward. Bastian couldn't remember what she'd said. Something about dragons and Connor. All Bastian could think of was the moment when Connor had died, lashed into pieces by that evil Stacia and her braid laced with metal shards.

What had Tressa tried to tell him? Had she known Connor was alive?

"His name is Connor. He's from Hutton's Bridge." Bastian grasped his friend's hand in his. He was thinner, his hair was longer, and a scraggly beard covered his face, but it was definitely Connor.

Elinor looked between the two men. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Now that the fog is down, there will be more of you wandering around out here."

"No," Bastian said, "he was with me and Tressa the whole time. He's the one Stacia killed that day in Ashoom."

Elinor shook her head, her blond curls falling over her shoulders. "I heard about it, but didn't see it. Stacia was a cruel leader. I refused to attend any of her so-called group absolutions. She was trying to make the townspeople fear the dragon under her command." She spit on a kerchief and rubbed away the blood on Connor's face.

"He is alive, isn't he?" Bastian asked. He'd already seen Connor die once before. It was almost like a dream to imagine his friend alive again.

Elinor rolled her eyes. "His chest is moving. Breath is escaping between his lips. He even made noises that attracted our attention to him. I would think it's safe to say that, yes, he is alive."

Bastian squeezed Connor's hand. He didn't receive any sort of physical reply. He searched Elinor's face, but all she had to offer was concern for Connor. "He's fully alive, right?" With everything he'd seen these past weeks, he was no longer certain about the borders between life and death. The woman in the tree had taught him that.

Elinor's eyes narrowed. "Yes, he is fully alive. He appears to be so." She laid the back of her hand on Connor's forehead. "He's not

warm either. No fever. In the absence of other symptoms, I don't feel confident declaring him ill. He looks underfed. Perhaps he's only starving."

"How did he get here? And with these eggs?" Bastian was baffled by the circumstances.

"We won't know until he wakes, so let's do what we can to help him." Elinor stood and wiped the dirt off her pants. "Stay with him while I check outside for herbs that can help him. If he starts to awaken, don't let him get up. We don't know what his stamina is like. I'd hate to have him get up too quickly only to fall and injure himself."

Bastian nodded, his eyes on his friend. Settling onto the ground, Bastian tucked the cloak around Connor's body to keep the cooling night air away from his skin. He couldn't wait for Connor to wake up. He had so much to tell him. Even more, Bastian had countless questions for Connor. How had he survived such a brutal attack from Stacia's spiked braid? Where had the dragon claws taken him after he'd been flayed? Had he died only to come back to life or had he only appeared to be dead? Where had he been for the last few months and how did he end up naked in a cave filled with dragon eggs?

Elinor snuck back into the cave, clutching sprigs of dry herbs in her hand. She grabbed a rock the size of her palm off the ground. After tearing the herbs into tiny pieces, she ground them into a fine dust on top of one of the dragon eggs. "It's the only dirt-free surface," she said with a shrug.

She sprinkled the bits into her palm, spat on them, and rubbed her hands together creating a thin paste. "Open his mouth for me," she instructed Bastian. She stuck her thumb in the paste and rubbed her thumb against the inside of Connor's cheeks.

"What will that do?" Bastian asked her, letting go of Connor's chin.

Elinor wiped her hands on her skirt. "If he's feeling any pain, that mixture will help to relieve it. Since he's already asleep, and possibly in some kind of stupor, I didn't want to give him anything that would make his sleep deeper. It could kill him. Sleeping draughts are very potent."

Bastian nodded. He remembered being given one by his uncle Adam, also a healer, not long ago after he'd emerged injured from the fog. He took a deep breath and marveled at how strong he felt. Elinor's healing powers were beyond compare. He'd fostered a deep distrust of magic after seeing it used for so many evil purposes. He was glad to know some could use it for good.

"What can we do for him now?" Bastian asked, eager for his friend to wake up. He missed Connor, especially with Tressa gone. Once they were back together, all would be right with the world. And Tressa

would be thrilled to know Connor was alive. He was her best friend too, and the glue that had held them together.

Elinor wrapped her arms around herself. The air only became cooler as the night dragged on. Her cloak was still under Connor, shielding him from the ground. "We can do nothing but wait. If he doesn't awaken by morning, I'll head back to Ashoom and fetch one of my fellow healers. We'll take care of him while you escape."

"You can't take him back to Ashoom. They'd kill him as surely as they'd kill me," Bastian insisted. "He'll have to come with me."

"He's in no condition to travel." Elinor glared at Bastian. Despite being small, she had no qualms standing up to him. "Not that far at least. We can bring a litter and carry him to Ashoom. I've taken an oath to heal and letting you whisk him away on a boat will only make him sicker."

"You don't even know what's wrong with him," Bastian retorted. "He might just be really tired after a long trek."

"He's naked and unconscious." Elinor rolled her eyes. "Men." She folded her arms across her chest. Once again Bastian forced himself to look away from his one weakness.

"I brought extra clothes for you." Elinor pointed to the pack on the ground near the entrance. "He can have them when he wakes up."

Bastian nodded. She'd thought of everything.

"I am a healer. One of the best. If not the best. And the strongest in magical healing. Trust me. I know what I'm talking about. For now, we need our sleep too. It's been a long day for you too. Not long ago, you were passed out, on the beginning of months of healing. Without me, you wouldn't be able to stand, much less argue with me. Now shut your mouth, lie down, and go to sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning." She pointed to Connor's back. "You there. I'm against his front. We'll keep him warmer this way."

Bastian obeyed without question. He'd never let a woman push him around like Elinor did. It was probably because he was tired and still healing. He stretched out next to his best friend and fell asleep within a few breaths.

Chapter 8

Fire burned in Tressa's chest, every breath searing a new wound in her lungs. Her lips chapped, beaten by the relentless wind. Bits and pieces of dried skin dangled and blood crusted in the cracks between. The desert was a hard, unforgiving place, devoid of all life.

She'd grown up surrounded by trees and damp fog. Here, her clothes hung on her, thin as peeling bark and stiff as corn stalks just before harvest. Her hair, once bouncy and thick, hung limp on her face, beaten down by the gritty sand that flew through the air like raindrops.

She hated the Sands and the days they'd spent on the horses.

But Jarrett had allies and friends in the Sands, not to mention influence with the queen. People would help them uncover the mystery of Hutton's Bridge. First the fog shrouding the village in a misty sarcophagus, then the disappearance of everyone who lived there. The red dragons sniffing around the village only compounded the mystery.

Still, she regretted leaving Bastian behind again. She was always doing that. Telling him she'd be back, only to sneak away on another adventure. She wished there was some way she could see him and explain why she'd chosen another path yet again. Bastian trusted her. She believed that with all her heart, but she couldn't expect him to wait on her forever.

She wasn't sure she'd do the same, though perhaps it seemed that way to everyone in Hutton's Bridge. She'd never loved any other man, even after her time with Bastian was dissolved due to her inability to get pregnant.

There were times, though, when she wondered if another man could turn her head. A man outside of Hutton's Bridge, if such a man even existed. She glanced at Jarrett out of the corner of her eye. He sat erect in the saddle, his resolute, brown eyes scanning the desert for signs of trouble. He'd kissed her twice now. Despite her feelings for Bastian, she'd liked it more than she wanted to admit.

Jarrett's lips had felt different than the other men's. Stronger. Sure. As if he were trying to help her remember something they'd once

shared. It unnerved her and turned her on at the same time. But there was Bastian. And she still loved him—she thought.

It was too confusing. She resolved to tuck these thoughts away where they wouldn't disturb her. Instead she looked ahead, hoping, praying, that the oasis Jarrett was leading them toward would shimmer into view. So far she'd spied nothing more than sand upon sand upon sand.

Jarrett's horse stumbled, then fell to the ground, legs folded. Jarrett fell out of the saddle, hitting the ground hard on one shoulder.

Tressa gasped and slid off her horse, landing in the slippery sand. She ran to Jarrett. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, but my horse isn't. I was hoping they could get us to the first oasis, Camel's Back." His voice scratched, muffled behind the scarf wrapped around his face. He'd offered her one and she'd stupidly rejected it.

"How much farther?" Tressa asked, doubting he could offer an answer. The desert looked the same no matter which direction she checked.

Jarrett pointed. "Not far to the west. Over that dune."

Tressa squinted. She couldn't even see a dune in the distance. She laid a hand on Jarrett's. His hand was steady, sure, as he stroked the dying horse's mane.

"I don't want to leave him here to die." Jarrett's voice cracked. He looked up at Tressa. "But if we stay, we'll die too. We have to move on." He stood up and clasped Tressa's hand. "You ride. I'll lead the way."

"No." She shook her head. "I'll walk too."

A muffled laugh came from behind his scarf. "You will ride because you're not used to the sand. I am. This is my home." He spread his arms out wide. "This is where I thrive. Trust me, you need to ride the horse."

She stroked her horse's dappled coat. "But won't it hurt him if I do? I don't want him to die like yours." She risked another glance at the ailing horse. Foam spittle gathered at his lips. His eyes were closed. Perhaps he was dead already. No, the stuttered rise and fall of his chest told her he was still alive and suffering.

"Your horse is stronger. That's why I chose him for you," Jarrett said. "I didn't have time to secure a better horse for myself. We left Ashoom so quickly. I took what I could get. It didn't ever occur to me that we'd be coming here. These horses aren't made for the desert. I think yours will be okay, though."

Tressa's heart ached. "But we can't just leave yours here to die." Her hand rested on her hilt. She'd never killed an animal before. In Hutton's Bridge, they raised a small herd of cows, pigs, and chickens

to provide meat for the community, but it was the job of the butchers to kill the animals when their time came.

"I'll do it," Jarrett said. "It's my horse." He grasped Tressa's shoulder. "But if your horse should falter, you will have to pull your blade. It is the only way to honor the animal's service."

She nodded and hoped fervently that her horse would make it to the oasis.

Jarrett pulled his sword from the scabbard. He knelt and whispered in the horse's ear, then patted its neck. Jarrett's forehead met with the horse's muzzle. Together, they breathed as one. He stood quickly and drove his sword into the horse's heart.

Tressa swallowed hard when the sword pulled free, the sucking sound nearly forcing the food out of her stomach. Again, she prayed for her horse's good health. If it came down to it, she would show the same respect Jarrett had. She just hoped she wouldn't be forced to.

"Let's go," Jarrett said. He pulled a cloth from his pack and cleaned his blade, red and sticky with blood. "The longer we take, the harder it will be on you and your horse."

"I'm fine. Really," Tressa insisted as she mounted. Really, she wasn't. Her eyes burned more with every blink. Sand stuck to her teeth, making them grit and grind with every word. Each breath felt like swallowing a double-edged sword. Only the promise of the oasis, with its tents and cool water, convinced her not to lie down next to the dead horse, letting the sand bury her alive.

Jarrett took hold of the horse's lead and began walking in the direction he'd pointed earlier. Tressa sat up straight, determined to make things as easy as possible for her horse, but in what felt like only moments, she'd slumped forward, leaning her body across the horse's neck. Her arms dangled to the side, her hands limp and useless in the hot afternoon sun.

A nudge at her lips brought her out of her stupor.

"Drink," Jarrett said.

She lay limp, too weak to tilt the canteen. Jarrett held it for her, letting the water drip into her mouth. Water dribbled over her lips. The cool droplets cascaded over her tongue and into her throat. Tressa felt a smile spread across her face as she lost consciousness.

Chapter 9

A cool breeze meandered over Tressa's face. Goose bumps radiated from her forehead to her toes. Tressa's eyes fluttered open. A large fan made of white feathers pumped up and down over her head, suspended from the ceiling by a series of ropes and pulleys.

Two women stood on either side of her. They held beige sponges, soaked in cold water, and they used them to clean Tressa's body of the sand. She looked down, surprised to see herself completely naked on the pallet.

"Where are my clothes?" She tried to sit up, but one of the women placed a firm hand on her shoulder, holding her down.

"All is well. Relax. Allow us to serve the promised of the First Guard of the Yellow Queen of Risos."

Promised? Her heart raced.

"Where's Jarrett?" Tressa asked.

"Your master awaits you. Until you have been cleansed, you are not to see him. A man such as the First cannot be burdened with a grimy bride to be. If you are not clean, he may throw you naked into the desert, allowing your flesh to be eaten away by the sand." The woman smiled, her toothy grin belying the harsh words she'd spoken.

Tressa lay still, wishing they'd work faster. If Jarrett was prancing around the oasis telling people she was his promised, then they needed to have words.

After what felt like days, Tressa was given a gown of pale gossamer. She suspected her own clothes had been thrown away or repurposed as liner in a stable. Even the attendants who'd bathed her wore gowns finer than anything Tressa had ever laid eyes on.

They offered to assist her in slipping the gown on, but Tressa insisted dressing herself. The two women exchanged a knowing glance and left her alone. The fan above continued to move up and down. As soon as she was dressed, Tressa intended to find out how the fan moved on its own.

The gown slid over her body, accentuating every curve, every muscle she'd developed over the last few months. The fine fabric draped as if it were made for her body, falling delicately to her toes. It

was then she realized her hair cascaded in waves down her back.

She'd cut her hair not long ago, keeping it short while she pretended to be a man of the Black Guard. Now her hair was longer than ever before. Tressa nestled her fingers into the crown of her hair, raking through the strands. At the base of her neck, she felt something strange. A small knot. No, a large grouping of knots.

So they'd found a way to add length to her hair. Tressa felt a sigh of relief. For a moment she'd feared she'd passed out and been unconscious for months. She laughed at her foolishness. This must all be part of making her beautiful for Jarrett.

As his promised—she couldn't help but snort when she thought the word—she would need to be beautiful. Well, if beauty bought safety and help for the missing people of Hutton's Bridge, she wouldn't fight it.

After slipping on a pair of sandals, Tressa walked back over to the fan. She eyed the pulley, following the rope to a hole in the top of the tent, where it disappeared to the outside. She parted the heavy silks and peered into another small tent attached to her own. A man sat on a wooden seat, his feet pedaling slowly, pulling the ropes back and forth in rhythm with the fan. She marveled at the invention. It was so simple in its construction, yet so ingenious. Yet she felt a stab of shame. This man's only job was to pedal endlessly just so she could have a light breeze in the tent.

"You can stop," she whispered to him. "I'm okay."

He startled, his eyes snapping wide. He mumbled a series of words incoherent to her foreign ears, his hands flailing in the air. He pedaled faster, his cheeks puffed out with exertion. Tressa let the silks fall and she retreated into the tent.

Jarrett had told her he worked for the queen, but she never expected this level of importance.

The silks parted, and the two women entered again. "He is waiting for you. Please, follow us."

Tressa did as they asked, curious what else lay beyond the tent. She stepped into the cool night air. Without the harsh sun beating down and the shrieking wind reduced to a light breeze, the Sands seemed like a whole new world to Tressa.

Stars twinkled in an unending black sky, lighting up the desert with a thousand cosmic lanterns. A spicy aroma wafted past Tressa's nose, enticing her senses. Everything was so different. So beautiful. Perhaps the Sands weren't as terrible as she'd thought.

Palm trees dotted the oasis, bringing life to the otherwise barren landscape. Jarrett had attempted to explain them to Tressa on their trek, but until she saw the exotic trees she hadn't realized how different they were from the tall maples and oaks of her home.

The women led her to another tent, this one four times as large as the one she'd left. Gold roping trimmed the blood red silks printed with the design of a camel. At least Tressa assumed it was a camel — another of the strange animals Jarrett had tried to explain to her. Creatures similar to a horse, but with humps on their backs. She hadn't spied one yet, but he'd promised they'd ride on camels to Risos.

Bowing, the two women parted the silks and gestured for Tressa to enter.

She stepped in, her eyes struggling to adjust from starlight to candlelight. The sharp spicy scent was even stronger, giving her a heady feeling.

"Jarrett?" she asked tentatively, suddenly nervous. Yes, she had definitely fallen asleep on the horse and woken in a land from Granna's tales. Fingers caressed her bare shoulder, startling her, followed by a familiar laugh.

"What do you think of Camel's Back? I know it's not much of an improvement over the desert, but it'll do for a quick rest before we head to the crown city." Jarrett stepped into view, his broad shoulders illuminated by the flicker of the flames. "Come, sit down. We'll talk a bit before retiring for the night."

She followed him to an assortment of brightly colored silken pillows, intricately stitched with tiny repeating patterns. She ran a fingertip over the designs, enthralled by such small, indulgent work. In Hutton's Bridge, every stitch served a purpose. "It's beautiful," she said, unable to suppress a smile. Despite all the tragedy and her desperate need to find her people, Tressa found herself relaxing.

Jarrett handed her a plate filled with exotic food. She watched as he chose a yellow square and tossed it in his mouth. "How I've missed the fruit of the Sands. Try some."

Tressa lifted one from her plate and touched it to her lips, surprised by the mixture of sweet and tart. She took a bite. Juice washed through her mouth, sending her taste buds into shudders of ecstasy. "I've never tasted anything so amazing in my life." She quickly put another piece in her mouth, then another. Her eyes rolled back, her lashes hitting her cheeks. She sank into the delicate fabric of the pillows and ate until she couldn't stomach another bite.

"Wine?" Jarrett asked, holding up a purple glass carafe with swirling braids of silver on the edge. "It's one of my favorites. I think you'll like it."

Tressa held out her hand, taking a full glass from him. She'd never felt so decadent in her life. She wondered if she was still passed out on the horse, hallucinating.

The wine washed down her throat, a delicate combination of berries and spices. Tressa didn't know their names, but she wanted to

learn.

"We have some things to discuss before retiring for the night," Jarrett said, setting his plate down on the floor.

"Yes," Tressa said, sad to break the spell. "First I need to know why those women believe I am your promised. Was that necessary?"

Jarrett's eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry, but it was. Without that label, it's likely you wouldn't make it to Risos alive. The queen can be very jealous."

"Jealous?" Tressa's interest was piqued. The queen had sent Jarrett with her youngest son, Henry, to take over the throne of the Blue. But Henry's youthful arrogance had cost him his life. Jealousy wasn't the feeling Tressa would have guessed the boy's mother would feel upon Jarrett's return.

"Yes. I am the First Guard to the Yellow Queen of Risos. I am her lover as well as her guard. If I didn't give you an official place beside me, she would kill you. Even now, I'm not sure your head is safe, but rumor will spread from oasis to oasis. By the time we arrive at Risos, everyone will know you exist. It will be harder to kill you."

"Ah," Tressa said, taking in the information. "Why not just make me your wife?"

Jarrett laughed, but Tressa didn't understand why it was so funny.

"Wouldn't I be better protected as your wife?" she asked, irritated.

"We have no proof of marriage. No witnesses." Jarrett shrugged and sank into the pillows.

Tressa raised her chin, vowing to be strong. "Then I'll pretend to be your promised, but only as long as it serves my needs."

The smile disappeared from Jarrett's face. His dark eyes looked sad. "Don't be over-confident, Tressa. You're entering a very dangerous place."

"Then why did you bring me here? Are you sure she'll help us?" Nerves fluttered around her stomach.

"Once I realized what happened to your village and I saw the red dragons searching it, we had no other option. The only help I can ask for lies here. We just need to hope it will be given." Jarrett stood and extinguished a candle. Then another.

"Aren't you going to wait until I head back to my tent before doing away with all of the lights?"

"Tressa, you are my promised. You must sleep here to keep up the charade," his voice softly reminded her.

Chapter 10

A low growl pulled Bastian out of an erotic dream. He rubbed his

eyes and sat up, his body aching with the lust his dreams had brought.

Connor still slept. Elinor lay next to him. Her little pink lips set in a snarl, her eyes scrunched shut and her delicate hands in fists. Another growl rolled out of her nostrils. Bastian smothered a laugh behind his hand.

So it was the healer. In her dreams she must be just as fierce as she imagined herself in real life. Bastian found it funny that a girl so small could be so confident. Woman, he reminded himself. She'd said she was eighteen. Not a girl, then. A woman in the dream he'd just had about her.

Bastian stood, careful not to nudge either of the sleepers. He squatted a few times, stretching his legs. Running his hands over his chest, he marveled again how fully his wounds had healed.

Elinor had risked a month of magical healing to help him. Maybe she'd seen him as a challenge, as badly hurt as he was. She'd said it was her first time. He was glad it worked properly and all of his parts were in the right place.

He checked on Connor and Elinor once more. Still asleep. He stepped out of the cave and into the forest. The sun barely glimmered through the thick tree canopy. He walked to the bank of the Snake River. The water meandered in a serpentine motion, bouncing off the rocks and trees that littered the riverbank. Bastian had never seen its like. Hutton's Bridge had one small pond they used for bathing. The rest came from wells.

Rushes swayed in the light morning breeze and the sun reflected off the gentle waves. Bastian hadn't bathed since he'd been healed. The filth of battle still clung to his body.

Bastian pulled his shirt over his head and his pants fell to the ground. He waded into the water, the chill biting his legs. He shivered, but continued to submerge until the water covered his shoulders. With lazy eyes, he scanned his skin. Not a blemish in sight. No pink and puckered healing wounds. Not even the scar he'd had since childhood. Tressa used to trace it with her fingertips and kiss it.

She'd laugh about the day he got it in the woods on the outskirts of the village.

Tressa, Connor, and Bastian had been playing tag. Connor was running at full speed. Bastian tried to outmaneuver him by feinting a run at the fog. Instead, he tripped and fell, landing on a tree stump that nearly punctured a hole in his chest. He'd slung his arms around Tressa and Connor's shoulders, and they'd taken him to his uncle Adam for healing, a sheepish grin on his face. They'd been warned not to play so close to the fog and Bastian wasn't happy he had to admit fault.

His thoughts drifted back to Tressa again. He hoped she'd gotten the answers she needed in Hutton's Bridge and come back to Ashoom looking for him. If Elinor was to be believed, one of the healers was watching for Tressa and would tell her where he'd gone. He needed to see her again, and he wanted her away from Jarrett.

Tressa swore Jarrett was honorable and that he wouldn't do anything untoward, but Bastian wasn't so sure. He saw the way Jarrett looked at her when they were trapped in the castle fighting for their lives. The man with the black goatee and dark skin wasn't only worried about winning. He was genuinely concerned about Tressa.

In part, Bastian was happy. He couldn't be there to protect her from Stacia. Jarrett had. For that, he was grateful. Tressa had changed while they were separated. It wasn't just her haircut. She seemed harder. Her face was thinner and her arms more muscular. Still, inside she was the same girl he'd loved back in the village. Vulnerable. Alone. Desperate for him to love her.

And he did. Very much. He couldn't stop thinking about her when he was awake. The dream he'd had was just that – a dream. Nothing more. Even if it was about Elinor.

Bastian closed his eyes as the sun's rays pierced the quiet morning. He smiled and rolled onto his back, floating. He let the water rock him as memories of Tressa flooded his imagination. He wanted, no needed, to see her again. He had to know she still felt the same way about him. And if she wasn't sure of his feelings, he'd show her.

Blood rushed through his veins as he thought of holding her again, caressing her tender skin, biting her lips in a moment of passion. A searing pain in his groin tore him from his reverie. Bastian floundered in the water, screaming out in desperation. Something had bit him.

Bastian splashed toward the riverbank, scrabbling for land, his fingernails digging into the damp dirt. A blood-curdling scream ripped from his throat. Within seconds Elinor came running.

"Bastian! Are you okay?" She stopped short when she saw him lying in the mud, completely naked, his hands cupped around his genitals. "What are you doing?"

“Something’s biting me! Help!” Bastian squirmed on the ground, in more excruciating pain than he’d felt after getting beaten by the men of the Black Guard. Even worse than when that huge guard had shoved his boot onto Bastian’s balls, making him pass out.

This felt like something was sawing away at his penis bit by bit. “Help me,” he whimpered.

Elinor sighed and sank down into the mud next to him. “Move your hands.” She swatted Bastian’s fingers, cupped tightly around his genitals. He didn’t budge. “I can’t help you if you don’t move them.”

“You’ll see me naked,” he said between gritted teeth. Pain seared through his body.

“I’ve seen plenty of naked men. You’re no different,” she said. Still, he didn’t move. “Fine. Take care of it yourself. But the piranhas in this river don’t let go of their prey easily. They will continue to chomp until they’ve eaten your entire manhood for breakfast.”

Bastian shut his eyes and moved his hands. He didn’t want to see whatever it was that had latched on to him. Instead, he felt Elinor’s fingers on his most private area. Despite the pain, he was aroused. And ashamed. And scared he was going to lose a chunk of his cock to some damn fish. Then what? Who would want him then?

“I think I’ll be able to save most of it,” Elinor said, her tone grave. “Just hold still. Keep your eyes shut and don’t look, Bastian.” Bastian did as she said.

A few more agonizing seconds and it was over.

“Don’t open your eyes yet.” Elinor’s hands were no longer on him.

A cold breeze drifted across his body. He kept his eyes squeezed shut. He didn’t want to open them. He was afraid to know what was left, if anything. The whole area throbbed and stung.

“Now, Bastian,” she said, hesitating, “I don’t want you to think that anything has changed. You’ll still be able to...perform.”

He moaned. How bad was it?

Then he heard it. The small twitter. The shaking in her voice. It wasn’t long until Elinor was full out laughing. Bastian’s eyelids snapped open. He glanced down. Other than two little teeth marks, everything was fine.

He sat up. “You lied!”

Elinor wrapped her arms around her stomach and gasped for air. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“You’re a healer! Do you make fun of all your patients like this?” Anger rose in his chest. He wanted to shake her, to make her see what a horrible thing she’d done. He glanced at the ground next to her, where the fish lay. It was a small thing. Barely bigger than his thumb. How could such a small fish hurt so much?

A blush crept over his cheeks. He didn’t have to see himself in a

mirror to know. It was the curse of his red hair. He blushed too easily and without warning. If he would have taken a moment in the water to look at himself, he probably could have removed the fish, tossed it to the side, and no one would have been the wiser.

Instead he'd lain on the ground, his bum squished in mud, dripping wet and exposing every inch of his naked body to a woman he'd just met. And she was laughing at him.

"I wish you would have said something before going in the river. I would have warned you." Elinor averted her eyes, her giggles subsiding into deep sighs.

"I didn't want to wake anyone up." Bastian grumbled as he pulled his shirt over his head. He yanked it down and covered himself as best as he could. "If you don't mind leaving, I'd like to rinse the mud off my legs and put my pants on."

Elinor nodded, looking toward the cave. "Of course. I should check on your friend anyway. He may need my help more than you do."

Bastian watched her walk away, her hips swinging confidently. She looked far different without her heavy cloak. Another breeze swept across his skin, reminding him he wasn't fully dressed yet. With a grunt, Bastian stood up and stepped into the river again.

This time he kept his eyes on the clear water around him, washing the mud off his skin. As soon as he was done, he climbed out and pulled his pants on. Next time, he'd be more aware of dangers lurking in the river.

He made his way back to the cave, curious to see if Connor was awake yet. He wanted to ask him so many questions. Elinor stood outside the cave, wringing her hands. "Oh good, you're back. You need to go in and talk to your friend. Something's not right."

Chapter 11

Bastian strode into the cave. Connor sat propped up against one of the eggs, Bastian's cloak wrapped around his shoulders. Connor looked up at him, his eyes bloodshot and eyelids swollen.

"How are you?" Bastian asked. He sat down next to his old friend, hands on his knees. He wasn't sure if he should hug Connor or punch him on the arm like they always did as kids. It had been months and so much had changed, but Connor was still his best friend.

Connor eyed him. His lips trembled as they slowly parted. "Who are you?" he asked Bastian, confusion in his eyes.

"You don't recognize me?" Bastian asked.

Connor shook his head, his sandy hair plastered in pieces to his head. He looked as if he hadn't showered in months. Not since he left Hutton's Bridge.

Like Bastian, he had somehow been healed. The wounds from the thrashing he took at Stacia's hands should have been deep scars, yet his skin was smooth. Dirty, but unharmed. His nails were long with mud caked under them.

"Your name is Connor. Does that sound familiar?" Bastian asked him.

"Maybe," he said. "I think she called me that."

"Who?" Bastian asked. "Hazel?"

Connor didn't react to his wife's name the way Bastian thought he would. "No." He reached up and wiped his nose with Bastian's cloak. "The woman in blue. She called me Connor, too."

Bastian's stomach sank. "Stacia?" He heard Elinor gasp over near the entrance.

Connor scowled into the distance. "Stacia. Is she here?" He looked over his shoulder. "Has she come for me? Did she find us?"

"Us?" Bastian asked. He hadn't seen anyone else in the cave, but he hadn't thought to look either. If Connor had someone with him, they were either hiding or dead in the back of the cave, forgotten and overlooked.

"My children," Connor whispered. He looked at Bastian.

Then Bastian realized Connor wasn't looking at him. He was

looking over Bastian's shoulder. At the egg. Bastian scooted away from the egg, unsure if leaning up against it would anger his friend. These things most certainly were not Connor's children.

"Where have you been since we left home?" Bastian asked his friend.

"Home?" Connor asked. "Were you in the dungeon too? Is one of these eggs yours?"

Bastian was even more confused. How could a dragon egg be his? Connor was clearly delirious. Somehow he'd been rescued just like Bastian had. Someone had healed him and hidden him here. "Elinor," Bastian called. "Can you come in here?"

She took a few tentative steps in. For the first time, she was unsure. From the moment he'd awakened, Elinor had been three steps ahead of him. Maybe now they were on even, unknown ground.

"Did anyone in your Healer's Guild heal Connor?" He set a hand on Connor's shoulder. His friend sat still, half awake and half in a stupor.

Elinor shook her head. "No. I would know. We discuss healings. It's part of our training."

"But there has to be a leader in your group. Maybe it was a high-level decision. Connor was dead, or at least he seemed that way to me. What if it was a secret operation?"

"No. You don't understand how we work. I would know. Connor wasn't healed by one of us."

"Then how was he healed?" Bastian sprang up. He ventured away from Connor, who didn't seem to care. "I saw him die. I saw it, Elinor." He rested his hands on her shoulders. "Someone had to have done something to him. Look at him."

Elinor stared at Bastian's shoulder, her eyes nowhere near Connor.

"Why are you avoiding looking at him? I haven't known you long, but I got the impression you weren't afraid of anything. What about Connor has you upset?"

Elinor's eyes traveled to the eggs again. "I don't know how Connor was healed. I really don't, Bastian. But something isn't right here. The eggs. Him. It's all wrong." She wrung her tiny hands together. "I don't feel safe."

"Connor wouldn't hurt you. Trust me. He's a good man. I've known him since we were little kids. He's my best friend." He didn't know how else to convince her. He'd just have to wait for Connor to feel better and prove it himself.

Bastian turned to his friend. Connor had gotten up from the dirt floor and was running his hands over one of the eggs, whispering to it. He went to each egg, doing the same, but eventually came back to the first egg. He seemed to favor it over all the others.

"I admit," Bastian said, turning back to Elinor, "his behavior is

strange. I can't pretend to know what he's been through. Look, I'll take him with me on the boat you're arranging for my travel. I'll care for him. You can go back to the town like you planned."

Elinor parted her lips to reply, but before she could get a word out, a loud crack broke through the peaceful morning air. Bastian spun around in time to see a crack in one of the eggshells widen. He watched in horror as a small claw emerged.

Chapter 12

Bastian grabbed Elinor and shoved her behind him. “Connor, get over here!” He’d seen the destruction an adult dragon could cause. A baby would be completely unpredictable. “Connor!”

Connor ignored him. Instead, he scurried over to the cracking egg, helping to peel back the broken pieces of shell. Connor tossed them to the ground, a smile taking over his face. “Do you see? The first one is hatching!”

The smell of rotten eggs and cooked onions overtook the dank musk of the cave. Bastian threw a hand over his nose. Elinor gagged behind him.

“We have to get out of here.” Elinor tugged on his sleeve, but Bastian wouldn’t move. Not without Connor. “Bastian, please,” she screeched, desperate. Her feet scrabbled over the rocky dirt at the cave’s mouth, but Bastian didn’t follow.

“Connor, now,” he pleaded.

Connor turned with a smile on his face. “I can’t leave. These are my children. I have to care for them.” He cracked another broken piece of shell, but didn’t remove it. The claw retracted and a full set of talons broke through.

Bastian’s stomach swam in circles. What was wrong with Connor? What had happened to him in the last few months? “Connor, your children are back in Hutton’s Bridge. With your wife, Hazel. Remember her? She loves you so much. Come with me. Let’s go home together.” Bastian held out a hand to his best friend. Bastian was brave. Most of his life, that was all he had. Today he couldn’t bring himself to step any closer to the dragon eggs than he had to. Connor would need to come to him.

“These are my children now.” Connor mingled his fingers with the baby dragon’s claws, still mostly ensconced inside the egg. “I don’t remember another family.” He looked pointedly at Bastian. “I don’t remember you.”

Connor stood taller. Every moment he spent coaxing the dragon out of its egg was another step toward looking stronger. Yet he didn’t look like the Connor Bastian once knew. He’d changed.

Still, they were best friends. Bastian had fought to save Connor once before, and he would fight for him again. He would never give up. Connor wouldn't leave him behind if their positions were reversed.

"I'm not leaving without you."

"Then don't go," Connor said. "Stay. Meet my children. Help me name them."

Bastian took a step toward Connor. He'd trusted Connor his whole life. He wouldn't stop now. Fists at his sides, he took another ten steps until they were standing shoulder to shoulder.

The dragon's snout poked out of the egg. Its mouth dripped with sharp teeth. Bastian stumbled back, afraid it would blow fire. Connor stroked the dragon's nose, cooing and coaxing it out of the cracked shell. With a final crack, the dragon burst out of the egg.

Connor laughed and held out his arms. The little dragon stumbled into them and nuzzled its head into Connor's shoulder. A contented puff of air wafted from its gaping nostrils. "Come closer," Connor said. "Meet her."

"Her?" Bastian asked. He swept his eyes over her, but couldn't figure out how Connor knew it was a female. He reached out with a quivering hand. The dragon snapped at his fingers. Heart pounding, Bastian yanked back his hand. "How do you know it's a girl?"

"I just do." Connor tickled it — her— under the chin. He placed the dragon down on the ground. Her legs splayed wide and she fell on her tummy.

Bastian couldn't help himself and laughed. She was cute, if he didn't think about the destruction she would eventually wreak on unsuspecting humans. He looked at Connor again. His friend's eyes were still wide in amazement. Connor had that same adoring look he'd given his two boys back in Hutton's Bridge.

"It will be some time before the others hatch." Connor walked around, patting and rubbing the remaining twelve eggs.

He stopped at the one farthest back in the cave. Though it was the same size as the others, this egg had a more subdued appearance. Its blue shell had a more sandy tone. It didn't have the raised markings. Smooth and speckled, it stood out as a stranger, but there was no mistaking: it was a dragon egg like the rest. Connor's hand rested lightly on the top. "This one will be the last to hatch."

He spoke with such authority. Bastian wondered how his friend could have learned so much about dragon eggs in only a few short months, all while forgetting his previous life.

Bastian knew from Connor's determined gaze that he couldn't drag his friend away from these eggs without brute force. It was the same expression the day they'd entered the fog. Connor loved his family more than life itself, which was why he was willing to risk his to save

them all.

What had changed? Why was he so determined to stay with these dragons?

“How do you know it’ll be the last to crack its shell?” They all looked the same size to Bastian. Or maybe they weren’t like human babies. Maybe you couldn’t tell from the outside like with a pregnant woman.

Connor smiled. “Because this one is my offspring.”

Chapter 13

Offspring. Connor believed a dragon was his child. And he was

claiming the other eggs as his too. Now Bastian knew for sure that his friend had sustained a head injury. Maybe it had happened in the forest when they were separated. Maybe it was after the dragon's claws had dragged his body from the platform where Bastian thought Stacia killed him.

Whatever it was, Connor wasn't right in the head.

"How long will it take to hatch?" Bastian didn't want to be trapped in the cave waiting on baby dragons. But he wouldn't leave without Connor either.

"I'm not sure. It might be months. Years." Connor didn't seem perturbed, the smile firmly etched on his face.

"Years?" Bastian repeated. "We can't stay here for years."

"Of course we can." Connor walked away from his precious eggs and the baby dragon. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect them." His eyes narrowed. "Even from you. But if you are who you say, if we truly are friends, then perhaps you'll respect my wishes."

Bastian's lips pressed together. He considered a myriad of responses, none of them appropriate for a man who didn't remember how close they'd once been. Connor was tough and if Bastian said what he was truly thinking, they'd probably end up with their fists in each other's faces. Bastian would win, he always did, but he didn't want to fight.

His best friend was now a stranger. Still, he wouldn't leave him behind, especially when he so obviously needed healing of the mind.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I need to feed my little hatchling." Connor motioned to the dragon. She scuttled across the dirt to Connor's side, just like a puppy. With adoring eyes, she looked up at him, her forked tongue hanging out. "I think I'll name you Fotia. Come on, let's go find you something yummy."

The two of them trotted out of the cave together. Bastian looked back at the eggs, then decided to follow Connor. He didn't have any food either. Elinor was gone and so was her pack. Maybe he and Connor could scrounge up some food. Though he wasn't sure a few

berries would be enough to feed Fotia.

Bastian remembered how ravenous his own daughter, Farah, was as a baby. Fotia was at least twice her size and probably twice as hungry, and she didn't have a mother to feed her.

Mother. All the eggs were shades of blue. If Tressa and Jarrett's story was accurate, Stacia was the only adult female blue dragon, which meant all the eggs were hers. He didn't want to connect the missing piece. So if Connor claimed one was his... Bastian shook his head, trying to force the thought out. No. Stacia had tried to kill Connor. She hadn't used him as a mate.

Connor tossed a stick to Fotia, letting her fetch and return it. He waved his hands above her head. She jumped, mouth wide open, teeth bared, attempting to grab a hold of him. It was too similar to the way Connor had played with his own boys back in Hutton's Bridge.

Something, or someone, had stolen Connor's memory. Bastian needed to find a way to restore his friend to the man he'd known since boyhood.

"Connor, wait for me." Bastian followed the dragon's mewling through the dense trees, ducking under branches and stepping through wet piles of decaying leaves. He'd been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he'd lost track of them. Fotia's high-pitched whine still echoed in the forest, but Connor had gone silent.

Bastian spied Fotia through the drooping branches of the willows closest to the river. She played on the edge of the water. Dipping a leg in, then pulling it back. Connor stood next to her, naked. He lay supine on the ground, splaying his arms and legs out to the side. Fotia jumped over him, flapping her little wings. She didn't gain any more air than the jump allowed. Her wings flapped uselessly in the light breeze.

Connor's body began to twitch. First, his legs, then his arms. His back jolted up and down, slamming against the ground in a frenzy. If it weren't for the blissful smile on his face, Bastian would have barreled through the vegetation to help him. And Connor's smile only grew wider as his arms and legs began to change.

His limbs contorted and stretched. Elbows and knees turned out. His light skin sprouted blue scales. His sandy hair sank into his skin as his head grew as his nose and mouth merged into a long snout.

Bastian trembled. Every inch of his entire body shuddered over and over like the little waves lapping on the shore of the river. Bastian held back a wave of nausea, swallowing the bile and memories of his dear friend from home. Simple Connor. Not this...this thing in front of him.

Connor morphed into a dragon, taller than the highest branches, wider than a copse of trees. His jaw dropped, and a plume of

controlled fire followed a great roar.

Bastian stumbled backward, his arse hitting a tree trunk. His arms reached behind him, holding onto the tree. Sweat pooled at his eyebrows, threatening to drip into his eyes.

His best friend. A dragon. And not just any dragon. It was the same one who'd helped Tressa and Jarrett fight Stacia.

"Bastian!" It came from behind. Elinor. She'd come back.

"Go," Bastian yelled over his shoulder, afraid to take his eyes off the beast that was now splashing in the river, grabbing fish in his teeth, and flinging them into Fotia's eager, open mouth. "Run away. Don't look back."

"No, I'm not going anywhere," Elinor said. She laid a soft hand on Bastian's forearm. "You can relax. He's not going to hurt you."

"How would you know?" Bastian asked, still holding tight to the tree. "He's nothing like the friend I grew up with. He's changed into... something else. I don't even know what. How can a human be a dragon? How can they change?"

"In my order, we know ancient things. Some of them are fact, others just theory. For a long time, we attempted to discover the nature of the dragons. Where they came from, how they reproduced. It was important for us to know in case we were ever called on to heal one of the ruler's beasts." She tugged on Bastian's arm until it dropped to his side. "The people of my order came up with strange hypotheses, none of which we'd ever been able to test." She let out a small breath. "Until now."

Bastian forgot his fear and faced her, anger stamping out the worry. "You will not experiment on Connor. I won't allow it."

Elinor's eyelashes fluttered down to her cheeks. "I would never hurt another living being. It is against everything I stand for. I had hoped you'd know that about me by now."

"I just met you," Bastian exclaimed. "I don't presume to know anything about you."

"My only purpose in life is to heal. If I could have the chance to learn how to heal a real dragon. To understand it." She clasped her hands to her chest. "Bastian, it would mean everything to me."

He sighed and folded his arms. In the distance, Connor continued to dive and toss fish to Fotia, providing for his child like any father would. Even though he'd changed and didn't remember his old life, that dragon was still his best friend.

"If you hurt him..." Bastian warned Elinor.

"I won't. I swear it! Oh, this is the most wonderful day of my life!" Elinor jumped at Bastian and before he knew it, she was in his arms.

Chapter 14

Tressa woke the next morning, her head groggy. She'd drunk too much of Jarrett's spiced wine and fallen asleep on the lush pillows. When she awoke, a silken sheet covered her. Jarrett slept on the pillows too, but too far away to touch. She rolled over, her back to him.

He'd kept true to his word. He hadn't so much as tried to kiss her. A perfect gentleman. It warmed her heart. Perhaps they could be friends, just as she had been with Connor.

Connor. Between the shock at Hutton's Bridge and passing out in the desert, she'd been preoccupied. There hadn't been time to contemplate the blue dragon that'd saved her and helped her defeat Stacia.

Clutching an emerald pillow to her chest, Tressa stuffed her chin into it, holding back tears. She hadn't cried since Granna died. Not when Connor's body had been shredded into bloody ribbons by Stacia's spiked braid. Not when she'd left Bastian behind in the forest. Not when her mentor, Leo, died for her in the ring so she could infiltrate the Black Guard. Not when Bastian had been injured and she'd had to leave him once again to pursue the mystery in Hutton's Bridge.

She'd left so much behind. And now, not knowing what was ahead. Tressa ached down to her bones. Her heart felt like a permanently tangled knot. She wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Salty tears slipped down her cheeks. She could have held her breath, forced them to stay hidden. Instead, they streamed down her face, turning the silk black where her tears landed. Salt covered her lips.

Tressa didn't wipe the tears away. Instead, she closed her eyes and gave herself a few moments to feel release. A hand on her shoulder interrupted her quiet moment. Tressa rubbed her eyelids, pretending to wipe sleep away and gave what she hoped was a convincing yawn.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Jarrett whispered in her ear.

She sat up, smoothing out her gown. Pushing her worries to the back of her mind, Tressa gave herself over to the moment, trusting in

Jarrett to get them where they needed to be. Once they found help, she'd begin fighting again. For now, there was little to do but follow.

Tressa grasped Jarrett's outstretched hand and stood. Her cream skin stood in stark comparison to the dark brown of his.

He pushed aside the silken curtain. Tressa threw an arm over her eyes as the blazing sun assaulted her. Squinting, Tressa squeezed Jarrett's hand. "I'm not used to anything this bright. It was always slightly overcast in Hutton's Bridge."

Jarrett laughed. "I know how you feel. I felt it was too dark in the Drowned Country. I worried I'd die in the competition just because I couldn't see as sharply. It was like constantly looking through a haze."

The camels kicked the sand around, their mouths foaming. Low, bellowing bleats fell from their wet flappy lips. Their stink made her eyes water. She kept her focus on the sand beneath her sandaled feet until an attendant offered his hand and hoisted her up into the saddle between the camel's two humps.

"The inexperienced travel through the desert and quickly die. My horse did. You nearly did," Jarrett said.

"I didn't almost die." Tressa swayed side to side with the camel's awkward gait. It was worse than the horse. She expected to be sore the next day.

"Actually..." Jarrett's voice trailed off. "I was concerned you would. You're not used to the dry heat of the desert. You were dehydrated and exhausted. You've been pushed past your limits."

Tressa shrugged, a smile on her lips. "You'd be surprised how much stamina I have." She pushed away the memory of the tears she'd shed not long ago.

"Someday I hope to find out." Jarrett winked and tossed her a teasing smile.

Tressa's cheeks flushed. "I didn't mean—"

"I know," Jarrett said with a laugh. "Don't take everything so seriously."

"We're only hiding from two mysterious red dragons who were tramping through my abandoned village, while trying to reach your lover, a queen, no less, who might help us. No reason to be serious. You're right." Tressa meant it as a joke, but the weight of her words tamped down all conversation.

A silence fell upon them. Tressa marveled at Jarrett's navigational skills. In the forest, she'd seen landmarks that could help guide her, streams, unique trees, that sort of thing. But here it was all the same. Only the sun's position changed, but that happened so slowly Tressa could imagine getting off course easily.

In front of them, four camels swayed, weighed down by the men riding them. With curved steel at their hips and fierce grimaces on

their faces, these guards, disguised as guides, protected them from the front. Six more guards traveled behind them, dressed as common merchants and minor nobility.

Jarrett explained how their clothes identified them to casual onlookers. The merchants wore robes, lined with golden fringe. Their turbans sat short and squat on their heads. The noblemen wore fine silk robes with turbans reaching toward the clouds. Tressa and Jarrett traveled under the guise of a man and woman recently married. Her gown was a bright amethyst and he wore a plume of peacock feathers on his back, signifying his virility and dominance.

Tressa thought he looked ridiculous, but Jarrett wore his disguise with pride. Back straight, eyes focused ahead, his camel only an arm's length away from hers. He wasn't afraid to let everyone know she was his promised. And while Tressa would have preferred to be responsible for her own safety, she was grateful to Jarrett. Without his help, she'd still be back at Ashoom, not knowing what to do next.

A shadow cast across them, blocking the sun.

"Ah, so you do have clouds here," Tressa said, shielding her eyes as she looked.

"That is no cloud!" Jarrett jumped from his camel, landing in a squat, his scimitar drawn. "Tressa!"

But it was too late. Something had already plucked her from her camel, carrying her into the sky.

Chapter 15

Fear engulfed every part of Tressa's being. She'd ridden on the blue dragon, but he hadn't snatched her from a camel's back and carried through the air like a mouse dangling from an owl's talons.

The golden dragon's claws wrapped around her arms and under her armpits, piercing her flesh. Blood trickled down her arms.

Tressa shrieked, her throat already torn into shreds from the desert heat, but she couldn't hear anything over the wind's constant screeching in her ears.

Or maybe it was the dragon.

She wasn't sure she'd live to find out.

Tressa's legs dangled, her bare feet tickled by the warm winds racing between her toes. Her sandals had fallen long ago.

She forced her eyes open, hot wind piercing her eyeballs. In the distance she saw it: a castle. Golden, rising up in a spiral from the ground through the clouds. It loomed closer, and with sigh of relief Tressa realized the dragon wasn't secreting her away, deep in the desert, to eat her for dinner. It was taking her exactly where she and Jarrett had been headed. To the throne in the desert, where Jarrett's lover reigned supreme over the land of heat and death.

Her relief turned to fear in a heartbeat. Jarrett had said the only thing that would protect her was her position with him. But the dragon had left Jarrett far behind in the desert. It would be three days until he could get to her. The queen could do a lot to her in three days.

True, she'd learned to defend herself. But one girl against a whole kingdom? She'd done it once, but only with help from friends and a great deal of luck. Here she had no one, and likely her luck had run out with Stacia's death. If Jarrett had told her the truth, and there was no reason to think he hadn't, Stacia's reign at the Blue had been considered a pathetic one by the rest of the Dragonlands. She had so few people to control. So few resources. Jarrett had said it was a like a child playing house.

Here, it would be different. Jarrett hadn't elaborated, but the hesitation in his explanations and the tight muscles around his eyes

told her everything she needed to know. They were throwing themselves at the mercy of the Yellow Queen because they had nowhere else to go.

Her stomach turned cartwheels as the dragon descended rapidly. Soon she could see a platform jutting out from the top of the golden tower. A smooth golden floor without railings. One wrong step and someone could fall to their death.

Without warning, the dragon released Tressa. She fell through the air toward the platform. Tucking her knees to her chest, Tressa braced for the impact. Forcing her eyelids open, Tressa landed in a hard roll, hoping she'd lose momentum before she came anywhere near to the edge.

She lost speed quickly and after her final roll, let her body unfold, sprawled on the platform. Two fingers drifted over the edge. It had been close, but she was alive.

A sharp snap captured her attention. "Bring her to me!" a shrill voice commanded.

Two pairs of feet clomped toward her. Four rough hands grabbed her arms, hauling Tressa to unsteady feet. "Walk." One of the men tugged, forcing her to take a step forward.

"I can walk on my own," Tressa said through gritted teeth. She shrugged off one and glared at the other. "Let me go. Now."

The voice cackled, hidden inside the dark tower. Tressa couldn't see, the sun was too bright, but she had her suspicions who waited inside for her. "Allow her to walk."

The men released their grip. Tressa's knees buckled, but she recovered quickly by sheer strength of will. She wouldn't appear weak in front of anyone if she could help it.

She'd survived the fog. Trained to be an elite warrior. Slayed a dragon. Walking into a tower inhabited by a queen with a legendary temper would be easy. Tressa strode through the entry, her head held high, despite the throbbing in her arms and the blood still pooling at the talon wounds in her arms. She wasn't a queen, but she carried herself as one.

With squinted eyes, she took in the queen. A crown sat atop the golden curls that fell to her waist, contrasting with her dark skin. Her son Henry's complexion had been very light, but his mother's was even darker than Jarrett. She was absolutely stunning.

Her green eyes sparkled like the emeralds in her crown and her mouth curved into a smile cats reserved for pouncing on a mouse. If her appearance was any indication, Jarrett was right about his queen. His lover was a formidable woman. Tressa held her tongue, waiting to be spoken to. She sank into a deep curtsy and stood again.

"You know who I am?" the queen asked.

"You are Jacinda. Queen of the Sands. The one who sits upon the royal throne of the Risos." Tressa recited the titles Jarrett had coached her on. She hoped they were right.

Jacinda's laughter split through the air like a newly sharpened knife. "You forgot one."

Tressa went back over what Jarrett had told her. She knew Jacinda had two sons, one here and Henry, and even the worst torture couldn't have made Tressa tell Jacinda her son had died at Stacia's hands. That was for Jarrett to tell.

"I am the woman who has bedded your man for four years. Nightly. And yet he dares to take you as a bride, bring you here, and flaunt you. For what purpose?" Her eyes took in every part of Tressa's body. "You are nothing. You aren't even shapely." Jacinda thrust one hip out to the side. "Jarrett prefers curvaceous women."

A blush burned on Tressa's cheeks. She didn't want to think about Jarrett like that, but the way Jacinda's eyes flashed in the candlelit room, Tressa couldn't help but wonder if, despite his flirting, Jarrett really did prefer a woman with more flesh to her.

"He won't be here for three days," Jacinda continued, uncaring that Tressa was speechless. "In that time you will tell me how you met, and when and how he first took you. I want to know if he treats you differently in bed than he has treated me."

Tressa's blush deepened. What could she say? Jarrett had done no more than kiss her, but if he was to be believed, her safety here depended on his commitment to her.

Jacinda shimmied over to Tressa's side. With one finger under Tressa's chin, her long nail scraped the delicate skin on Tressa's neck. "Before Jarrett arrives, I will have the answers I seek. Now tell me, when did he first make love to you?"

Tressa hesitated. Before she could formulate an answer, Jacinda slapped her cheek.

"You will answer me now, girl!"

"A fortnight after we met." Tressa spat out the lie.

Jacinda slapped her other cheek. "I don't believe you." She leaned in closer, bent over a bit, her eyes even with Tressa's. "You're lying to me."

"I'm not," Tressa insisted.

Jacinda scratched her nails down Tressa's already sore cheek. "Guards!" The two men jogged back into the room, their muscles flexing. "Take her to the torture chamber. I need to know why she is here before Jarrett arrives. She's lying."

The men yanked Tressa toward an interior door. Her heart thudded. Why did this woman care so much if Jarrett had chosen another? He wasn't her husband. Why torture someone over it?

But she didn't get the chance to ask. One of the guards grabbed her and tossed Tressa over his shoulder, beginning the long descent from the throne room in the tower to the torture chamber far into the bowels of the earth.

Chapter 16

Tressa dangled from the stone wall, her arms stretched away

from her body, her wrists bound with rope. Her toes barely touched the floor; her dark hair hung around her face, damp with sweat and tears. Every movement resulted in burning and searing flashes of pain.

When the guards brought her down and tied her up, candles had lit the dank room. As they left, the guards blew them out, leaving Tressa washed in blackness. Every moment felt like many days had passed. Her toes scrambled to find purchase on the floor. Her arms screamed in agony, the veins and skin stretching beyond her worst nightmares.

Torture chamber. All she did was hang there. Was this the torture or only the beginning? She closed her eyes, praying for Bastian, for Jarrett, for the blue dragon she thought was Connor, for anyone, even Leo's ghost, to find her and rescue her. Given any opponent, she'd be happy to fight for her life with a sword. But here, hung and left alone, she couldn't.

The silence was deafening. Not even the light footsteps of a brave mouse could be heard. It was as if they'd dropped her in here and forgotten she existed. Her hands drooped, her fingers limp and tingling. The rope cut deeper into her wrists. She shut her eyes, let out a long breath, and, with a resignation she didn't know existed in her fighting soul, she gave up.

No one would find her. Even when Jarrett made it to town, he wouldn't know where to find her, and the queen was unlikely to tell him. But on the chance he did know where to look, it would be too late. He was three days out and Tressa knew she would never last that long.

Not like this.

She'd be lucky if she lasted the day.

Or unlucky.

A small noise in the distance snapped her head to attention. Muffled voices became louder; she was almost able to make out their words.

"Help!" she screamed in the room, her voice bouncing off the walls in a pathetic echo. "Help me, please!"

The voices grew louder. Closer. Until she heard a click in the lock on the door. Candles burst to life, one by one, until Tressa could see who had come to rescue her.

"Ah, there she is. My new prize." Jacinda swept into the room, her golden hair twisted in uncountable braids, captured in a bun on the top of her head, and adorned with a golden tiara.

Tressa's stomach sank. There would be no rescue. Not now. Maybe not ever.

An old woman, wrinkled so heavily her nose was the only feature Tressa could make out with any certainty, followed. Her lips and eyes hid within the vast gullies of her face. A small smoking pipe drooped from between two large wrinkles. A sickly, sweet smell filled the room.

It was similar to the incense they'd burned on the oasis. For a moment, Tressa could taste the sweet juice of the papaya dripping down the back of her throat.

While on the oasis, she'd been nothing but anxious to continue their journey and find help in tracking down the people of Hutton's Bridge. Now she wished that she was back on the oasis. Clean, unharmed, and surrounded by the safety of Jarrett's tent.

"What are we doing with her?" the old woman asked, the pipe bouncing up and down with each word. Ashes fell, skittering along the floor like dust mites in a gentle breeze. One finger touched under Tressa's chin as the woman walked closer and stared into Tressa's eyes.

The irises of the woman's eyes were huge, crowding out almost all of the grassy green pigment. Drugs. Tressa had seen those eyes before in Hutton's Bridge when she, Connor, and Bastian had stolen some grass from the meadow and smoked it. They'd laughed and laughed, muffling their conversation behind pursed lips to avoid getting caught. But this woman smoked it in the open, not caring who saw. The Sands truly was a strange place.

"I need to pull the truth out of her," Jacinda said, strolling around the dungeon as if it was her throne room.

"What truths do you seek, Jacinda?" the old woman asked. She winked at Tressa, squeezed her chin, then turned back to the queen.

"I need to know the true nature of her relationship with Jarrett." Her eyes blazed. "Everything she's told so far is lies, Miranda."

"And you know this because..." The old woman, Miranda, placed her hands on Jacinda's shoulders. The queen relaxed a bit, her arms dangling at her sides.

"Because I know Jarrett," she said with a sigh.

Despite the clothes and the crown, she no longer looked like a queen. Only a woman worried about her man's wandering eye. Tressa had seen that stooped posture and lost look in herself after Bastian

was taken from her and given to Vinya. Still, Tressa hadn't assaulted Vinya or locked her in a dungeon. She understood, but she felt no sympathy from Jacinda.

Jacinda shook Miranda's arms away. She pulled herself up, regal once again. Reaching out, Jacinda grabbed skin from Tressa's arm between two fingers and pinched until Tressa couldn't help but whimper. "You will tell me what Jarrett wants with you. And Miranda will make sure you don't die during the torture."

With wild eyes, Tressa looked to Miranda, who winked at her again. "It's true, my dear. I'm a healer. A gifted one. I can take a person from the brink of death and draw them back to life. Again. And again. And again. Endlessly."

"Jarrett and I came here for help," Tressa said, forgetting she'd promised to let Jarrett introduce their story with finesse. "I'm from Hutton's Bridge."

Jacinda took a step backward, stumbling into a wall. "No! Hutton's Bridge is a tale, nothing more. A ghost town hidden in the fog. There were no survivors." She shook her head, her hair cascading out of the loose bun, dangling over her face. "It's another lie. Miranda, prepare to heal her."

The queen went to the armory on the wall, grabbing a sharp metal device. Like the wishbone of a chicken, two metal bars were connected at the top, with two spikes at the bottom of each bar. Jacinda squeezed and the spikes clashed together with a sickening metallic scratch.

"Do you know what this does?" Jacinda asked Tressa, taking slow, small steps toward her.

Tressa didn't answer. She couldn't have uttered a comprehensible word if she'd tried. Her mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton, her throat tight, overflowing with the erratic beat of her heart.

"It will tear at the flesh of your breasts. It will puncture holes. Ugly holes, not pretty piercings. No, the ripper will mimic the teeth of a famished tiger, eating his first meal in days." Jacinda smirked. "But don't worry, Miranda will heal you before you die. I wouldn't want you bleeding to death before I get my answers. Miranda, would you please..."

Miranda took a long drag of her pipe, then placed it on a nearby shelf. She laid her hands on Tressa's head. "At your leisure, Jacinda."

She clanked the ripper together a couple more times. Lunging for Tressa, she snatched the front of her dress, ripping it in two, exposing Tressa's breasts to the cold air.

Tressa jerked against her bonds in an effort to cover her body, but the ropes only dug in harder, keeping her from defending herself against this insane woman.

Jacinda smiled. "Nervous, are you? It's okay. Most women are. They don't like being tortured. Occasionally the men enjoy it, but only rarely. As soon as you tell me what I need to know, I'll set you free."

Tears spilled down Tressa's cheeks. "I already told you. I'm from Hutton's Bridge."

"Liar," Jacinda screamed, her eyes feral. She lunged again.

Tressa closed her eyes and held her breath, waiting for the pain.

Nothing came except a loud thud on the floor.

She opened one eye slowly.

Jacinda lay sprawled on the floor, the ripper next to her. "Why did you do that?" she screamed at Miranda.

The old woman scurried to Jacinda's side, whispering in her ear.

"She's what?" Jacinda roared. Her head swung, and she looked Tressa straight in the eyes. "You're pregnant." She spat out the words as if they were chunks of vomit left in her mouth after purging.

Tressa forced herself to appear defeated. Wounded. Fearful. Despite the joy rising in her chest, she bit her lip and cried.

Pregnant. After all this time she was finally pregnant. Love filled her heart. Hope. A new determination to fight her way free.

"So that's why he's marrying you." Jacinda laughed manically, her head falling backward. "He doesn't love you. He probably doesn't even like you." She poked Tressa on the arm with the ripper's fangs. Blood dripped, fresh and coppery. "Are you a whore? Did he pay you for one night, and you tricked him by poking a hole in the linen sheath meant to hold his seed?" Jacinda took a swipe at Tressa's other shoulder.

Pain seared though her veins. It mingled with her joy. Pregnant. And with Bastian's baby! They'd tried so hard back in Hutton's Bridge, but she had never been able to conceive. Now they could have everything they wanted. Tressa hardened. She had another life to protect. The most precious life in Dragonlands. Which meant she had to give Jacinda exactly what she wanted.

"Jarrett loves me!" she insisted. "I am no whore. He will marry me as soon as he arrives and it will be for love. He does not even know I'm pregnant."

Jacinda dropped the ripper. It clattered on the floor. "He does not know? Truly?" She stepped closer and closer until her nose was just a breath away from Tressa's.

Tressa pulled on the ropes, wanting to wrap her fingers around Jacinda's throat. Still, she was strung too tightly and couldn't do more than flick her wrists. "He doesn't. I didn't even know."

"You will not tell him," Jacinda said with a snarl.

"I won't. I swear," Tressa answered, desperate. Anything to get free.

"You will not tell him because you will not remember." Jacinda spun on her heel, stalking away. "Miranda, call the royal mage. Ask

him to erase this girl's memory from the moment she arrived here."

"No!" Tressa screamed. "Don't take this away from me! Please! I swear I won't tell, just don't make me forget!"

Miranda cackled, following Jacinda out of the room, leaving Tressa alone.

"I won't forget you," she promised her baby. "I swear. No matter what they do to me, I will not forget."

Tears spilled from Tressa's eyes as she gasped for breath. "I will not forget," she repeated over and over again until a man entered the room.

His head was buried deep within a royal blue robe, decorated with the stars of night. His large, thin hands rose, resting on her face. "It will not hurt. Do not fight me." His voice sounded like glass breaking.

Tressa tried to appear brave. She tried to hold back the tears as the wisps of memories flew from her consciousness.

Chapter 17

For days Elinor and Bastian helped Connor care for Fotia.

After he'd changed back into a human, no one uttered a word about it, as if they were used to humans turning into dragons all the time.

Elinor spent as much time with Fotia as Connor did. She cooed at the dragon, let Fotia sit on her lap, and even fed Fotia food from her hand. Bastian couldn't quite convince himself to try. He liked his fingers too much. One small slip and he'd lose a digit. At night, they all snuggled together, draping the two cloaks across them to stay warm. Fotia slept at their feet.

"I think I should head back to town and get more food. We're almost out." Elinor motioned toward the mouth of the cave. "It would take me nearly a day to walk there and back, but I can make it if I start now."

"Alone?" Bastian asked. "Are you sure?"

"There's plenty of food here," Connor said. "The fish are tasty."

Elinor laughed, and Bastian joined in, though it was a nervous reaction. He still hadn't gotten used to the idea that his friend, who had always been as human as Bastian, was now also a dragon. But he was determined to protect him until Connor could get his memory back. Once they understood how he'd changed, Bastian hoped they could change him back to the way he used to be.

"While the fish is spectacular, I'd like some bread." Elinor licked her lips and winked at Bastian who'd cooked up a filet for each of them the night before over a fire. "And apples. And some jerky."

She grabbed one of the cloaks and twirled it in the air. It landed squarely on her shoulders. "I'll be back before you miss me."

"Be careful out there," Bastian said. "Are you sure you don't want me to come?"

Elinor's lips curved into a smile. "If I show up in Ashoom with you, a tall, muscular redheaded man that every guard in town is looking for, we'll never get out of there alive. I'd also like to find out if Tressa and Jarrett have returned with news of your village."

Bastian hadn't thought to ask her to check on them, but he was glad she'd remembered. If there was news...maybe even if Tressa was

back, they could be reunited by the end of the night. "Thank you." He still felt guilty letting her go alone, but sending Connor wasn't an option either. "Fine," he said, giving in. "Promise me you'll keep your eyes open."

She laid her hand on his arm. "I promise. I'll come back in one piece." The sparkle returned to her eyes. "And I will have a lot of food."

Bastian watched her sashay out of the cave. Connor cleared his throat and Bastian turned back. "What?"

"You fancy her."

"Her?" Bastian asked. He shook his head. "No, I'm in love with Tressa. Do you remember her?"

"The woman who killed Stacia?" Connor asked. Over the last few days, Bastian had filled him in on what happened. Connor still couldn't remember his life before Stacia, but he did recall Tressa and helping her. "There's something special about her. I knew that when I entered the battle. It wasn't only seeing her attack Stacia. I recognized her."

Bastian's eyebrows rose. "Really? You didn't mention that before."

Connor waved his hands. "No, not in the way you think. Remembering her was like recalling a dream before it fades away. I knew her, yes, but I couldn't tell you anything about her."

"Do you want me to tell you more about Hazel?" Bastian asked. The last time he'd brought up Connor's wife, Connor had claimed it was time to feed Fotia and abruptly left the cave.

Connor's smile disappeared. "No." He stood up, brushed the dirt off his pants, and proceeded to make his rounds with the eggs. He gave each a loving pat and whispered his secrets to them.

"Why not?" Bastian pressed. "She loved you very much and you loved her. Don't you want to know more?"

Connor whipped around, anger flaming in his eyes.

Bastian feared for a moment Connor might change into a dragon and burn him to a crisp. With his ashes scattered across the cave floor, Elinor might never know what happened to him. Still, he held his ground.

"How would you feel if someone told you about a woman you once loved with all your heart and soul? One you would die for. No matter how many times your friend tried to remind you, what if you couldn't remember her?" Connor relaxed his clenched fists. "I have to focus on what I do know and that's these eggs. They need me. Fotia needs me. Would my wife accept them if I went back to her? They are my family now."

"I understand," Bastian said. It was only partly true. Still, he wouldn't push anymore. "If you change your mind..."

"I'll ask," Connor answered.

They worked in silence the rest of the day. Connor cared for Fotia, changing into his dragon form only once to feed her. Bastian gathered fallen branches for their fire. He jumped at every bird skittering through the trees, every frog croak, and every whistle of the wind in the leaves.

It wouldn't be long until Elinor was back with news of Tressa. Or maybe even Tressa herself. He couldn't help but hope Jarrett stayed far away.

As the sun sank behind the trees, Bastian built a fire near the entrance to the cave. He tossed on one stick after another. The fire leapt in the air, shooting flickering lights around the cave.

A twig cracked outside. Bastian paused, holding the last branch in his hands. No other sounds followed. Maybe it was just a squirrel or a rabbit. Surely Elinor couldn't make so little noise, especially not if she was bringing Tressa back with her. He expected low whispers. Maybe a giggle or two. Tressa would be as thrilled to see Bastian as he would be to see her.

"Bastian?" Elinor crept into the cave, her hood drawn tightly over her face. "Are you and Connor alone?"

"Except for Fotia, yes." Bastian dropped the stick on the fire. He glanced over her head. "Where's Tressa?"

"She wasn't in Ashoom. She hasn't been back yet, according to my sources. They've been watching for her."

Bastian tried not to let the disappointment show. Last time she promised they'd avenge Connor together. Instead she'd taken off in the middle of the night leaving him alone in the forest. This time she'd left with Jarrett, promising to come back, and hadn't shown.

Either she was hurt or she'd lied to him—again.

"That's fine," Bastian said, glad for once that Connor didn't have his memory. His friend would have known he wasn't being honest. "Just let me know if you do hear anything."

"Well, I have other news that might impact everything."

Bastian raised a ginger eyebrow. "What?"

"As you know, the kingdoms are all run by a leader with a dragon. Now the Blue has no leader—and no dragon." Elinor stopped and took a deep breath, her hand over her heart. "Sorry, I'd been running for a while."

While she caught her breath, Bastian's mind raced. The Blue did have a dragon, but no leader. If anyone found out they were hiding Connor here, along with a group of dragon eggs, everyone would be hunting for them.

"We have to move Connor and the eggs, quick. Where's a safe place?" For a moment Bastian cursed himself for eliminating the fog

around Hutton's Bridge. They could have hidden there.

Elinor looked up at him, a smile gracing her curved lips. "We don't have to hide, Bastian. You can take the throne if Connor agrees to be your dragon."

For the first time since Elinor came back, Connor spoke. "I'd rather that than hide the baby dragons out here. There are tunnels under the castle and the town where I can hide them. It's where Stacia hid us before."

Bastian's hands fell to his side. "Me? A leader?"

"With a blue dragon, no one can stop you, Bastian." Elinor clapped her hands together.

"What do you get out of this?" he asked her, suspicious.

"I only want to study the baby dragons. That's all." A small pout formed on her face. "What did you think I wanted?"

Bastian didn't have an answer. It just seemed to him that people didn't make offers unless they had a personal reason. "Who says I even want to be a ruler? I don't know anything about leading a town, much less sitting on a throne."

"It's that or run." Elinor crouched next to the fire, rubbing her hands. "The rumors about Connor's existence are spreading. The town is abuzz with talk of the blue dragon escaping. They're forming groups to hunt for him now. I would expect them to find us in a matter of days."

"I will need advisors. Guards. How am I supposed to find people I can trust so quickly?"

"I can help you with that, Bastian." Elinor stood and took his hands in hers. "Trust me."

He looked into her blue eyes, lit by the glow of the fire. He nodded and looked at Connor. "Are you sure you want this?"

"I don't know where else to take my children. If you can keep them safe..." He trailed off, his hands on the egg he'd claimed was his biological child.

Bastian looked at Fotia bounding around the cave like a puppy. Elinor's eyes were so hopeful and Connor, his best friend, wanted him to do this.

"Okay. I'll take the throne, by force if I have to."

Chapter 18

The next morning, Bastian, with red knuckles, held on to the scales of the dragon's back. Connor's back. He still had trouble reconciling the dragon with his friend. He'd seen Connor transform more than once, and still, the whole idea seemed so far-fetched. "Are you sure this will work?" Bastian asked Elinor.

Elinor stood and smiled. "Yes, it will. You look so regal up there. Like you've been a ruler your whole life." She crossed her arms over her chest, nodding. "Besides, if you fly in on Connor, who will stand against you? No one, that's who."

Bastian forced a smile and cleared his throat. He wasn't a leader. He'd commanded the mission out of Hutton's Bridge and through the fog, but that didn't mean he should take a throne.

"They fear and respect the dragon, Bastian." Elinor reminded him.

"I know," he said, "and they hate the leader."

No one had liked Stacia, but with the power of the dragon they hadn't really been given a choice.

"It's the only way to keep Connor and the babies safe. We have to." Elinor looked back toward the cave. Fotia pranced around in the entrance, lost in her own little game. "They'll kill her. Do you want that?"

Maybe he did. If the baby died and the eggs were smashed before the others could hatch, then Bastian and Connor could escape. They could find a way to turn Connor back into the human he once was. Restore his memories. Reunite him with Hazel and his boys. Then the nightmare would be over. Everything would go back to the way it was.

"Do you?" Elinor asked again, tapping her foot on the ground.

Connor's neck snaked around until one slitted brown eye was staring into Bastian's face.

"No, I don't," Bastian said. He attempted to put some conviction behind it instead of the grumbling he had in his head.

"You should ride in with me." Bastian held down a hand to Elinor. He wasn't comfortable storming into the town and claiming the throne alone. Not even with Connor underneath him, posing as his muscle.

"I can't. I'll meet you in the castle soon, though. I promise." She lifted her skirt, showing off her heavy boots. "I'll walk back eventually."

"Afraid?" Bastian asked her.

"Of course not." The toe of one of her boots ground into the dirt.

She'd seemed fearless every moment since he'd met her. For the first time, Bastian found a chink in her armor. "Afraid of heights?" he asked. After climbing to the forest canopy, Bastian was pretty sure he could handle the flight. Probably.

"If I ride in with you, people might assume we're together," Elinor said, placing emphasis on 'together.' "My role in your rule will be nothing more than a healer. I don't want to be on public display."

"Fair enough." Bastian looked at the rising sun. "When should we go?"

"As soon as possible. Once you're secure in the throne room, Connor can come back for the eggs. I'll keep them safe until then."

"You sure you'll be okay?" Bastian was surprised how much he cared about her already. It had only been a few days, but Elinor had grown on him. He owed his life to her, yes, but he was surprised to find he truly enjoyed her company. It had been so long since anyone other than Connor or Tressa had made him smile.

Elinor cocked her head to the side. "I've been taking care of myself for the last eighteen years. One more day won't change that." A little smile graced her lips. "You should ride off now, Bastian. You have the element of surprise. Take Ashoom by storm and claim it. The Blue throne is yours."

If the only requisite to taking the throne was controlling a dragon, then yes, the throne did belong to him. He didn't want it, though. As soon as he could give it up to someone better, he'd happily hand it over. "Are you ready, Connor?" he asked.

The dragon's head bobbed up and down. Under his legs, Connor's body moved. The ground swiftly fell away as Connor took flight. Wind blew through Bastian's hair. He glanced down at Elinor. She waved as Fotia pranced around her feet, flapping her own wings.

Bastian focused ahead. The highest spire of the castle peeked out of the canopy of trees, not far away.

It had taken better part of a day for Elinor to lead him to the cave. Flying back would be faster. Much faster. So fast that he knew there would be no time to change his mind. The townspeople wouldn't see the blue dragon until he was upon them, thanks to the tall trees. There wouldn't be time to raise a revolt.

All he had to do was scare them into submission. It would likely be easy with the townspeople. The guards would be another story. The elite guards who'd taken him captive wouldn't be happy to see him,

but Bastian had a special surprise in store for them, especially the one named Marden who had handled him so roughly when dragging him before Stacia.

Knowing he'd get to hurt them back filled Bastian's soul with a vengeful longing. Without that, he might not have caved to Elinor's plan. He considered smiling, but then thought better of it. A bug in the teeth wasn't appetizing.

Connor glided into the topmost window of the castle. Bastian hadn't noticed the last time he'd been in the throne room, but this window was just the right size for a dragon to fly through. With his wings folded, Connor landed gently on two feet and slowly brought his arms to the floor.

Bastian slid off his friend's back. His hands were damp from gripping so tightly, and he wiped them on his pants. A few men in black stood in the doorway, their backs to him.

Connor's silent flight had yet to alert them to their presence. Good. Bastian cleared his throat.

The men jumped, turning around in surprise.

"How did you get in here?" It was the huge man whose knee had so brutally made the acquaintance of Bastian's crotch. He squinted. "Hey, you should be dead."

Bastian held steady, ready for a fight. Connor snuffed behind him and spurted a small gust of fire over his head. "As you can see, I'm not dead. In fact, I'm back to take Stacia's throne."

"Marden?" another man asked. "Should we attack?"

Bastian rolled his eyes. For an elite guard, they came off as rather idiotic.

"He has a dragon," the smaller man said while Marden remained silent. "The law says—"

"I know what the law says," Marden said. He stood with his sword ready, but he didn't attack Bastian. "You're not from here. You don't deserve to hold the throne."

"Your law says anyone with a blue dragon is eligible for the throne." Bastian looked to his left, then to his right, tempering a smile. "I don't see anyone else here with a dragon ready to make a claim. I may have grown up in Hutton's Bridge, but I still am part of the Drowned Country. I can take the throne if I have the dragon's might behind me." He looked at Connor and winked. "And I do."

Marden's lips pursed, and his eyes narrowed. He tossed his sword at Bastian. It clattered across the floor, coming to rest just steps from Connor's sharp claws. "I won't fight you." He nodded at Connor. "It would only mean my death and I'm not prepared to die yet." He turned on his heel, leaving the room.

The other man stood still, his eyes wide. His hand shook as he held

up his sword, then he dropped it and ran away.

"Well," Bastian said, patting Connor's scaly back, "I think we've faced our first opposition and won."

"Not quite." A dry voice echoed in the throne room.

Bastian eyed the man in the doorway. He wore a cape similar to the one Elinor had worn. Sunlight glinted off his clean-shaven head. A toothy smirk peeked out from behind a bushy beard barely concealing sunken cheeks.

Low and self-assured, he continued. "I am your new advisor, Maester Malachi. I promise to help you take and maintain the throne."

"What do you want in return?" Bastian asked, uneasy.

"Why, to study the dragons, of course. We healers have never been allowed access to them. Elinor assured me of your cooperation."

Bastian eyed the cadaverous man. He trusted Elinor. He would have to trust Malachi as well.

Chapter 19

"What if the other soldiers rise against me?" Bastian asked Malachi, crossing his arms over his chest. He'd gotten rid of one problem only to find another. He didn't know this man and he wasn't prepared to trust him. "Only two guards have left. There are others."

"My fellows healers and I will deal with them," Malachi promised.

Bastian didn't feel assured. "What can a group of healers do against trained soldiers?" If every healer was a small woman like Elinor or a twig-thin old man like Malachi, then their plan was doomed.

A chuckle reverberated in Malachi's throat, the bump in his neck bobbing up and down. "Those soldiers owe us their lives. We've healed them over and over again. Small wounds. Grievous injuries. We've delivered their children. Nearly every soldier in Ashoom owes a healer his life. They will not stand against us."

"You, but not me. Not the dragon." Bastian gestured to Connor. He hadn't forgotten his friend, trapped in the body of that beast.

"If we stand before you, no one here will break that line. With the healers on your side, you will have more power than Stacia ever had. It will be our choice who lives and who dies. Not just by your hand, but by ours." Malachi touched the fingertips of each hand together, forming a triangle in front of his chest. "It is time we used our skills for something other than the whims of the crown."

Bastian's eyebrow rose. "Who will be the real leader here?"

"You, of course," Malachi said with a smile. "We have no need of the throne for our own purposes. Our partnership with you only affords us the chance to study the dragons. To heal according to the severity of their injuries, instead of to the queen's orders. We will protect you if you give us our freedom."

Bastian remembered the physic who had been given charge over Connor when they'd first arrived in Ashoom. He'd claimed he didn't want to hurt Connor and he'd been killed by evil magic when he tried to give them information. Bastian knew firsthand how insidious Stacia's control had been.

He strode to Malachi, his hand extended. "I will give you freedom, this I swear."

"We will protect you as long as you remain true," Malachi said, taking Bastian's hand in his.

They shook only once, a powerful, sure meeting of two men.

"Now, if you don't mind, I have matters to attend to. I have stationed three of my men outside the throne room. No one will question their authority."

"And if they do?" Bastian asked, still unsure a group of inexperienced healers could intimidate battle-hardened soldiers.

A shadow spread over Malachi's eyes. "If they do, they will discover we not only have the power to heal, but also to destroy." He turned, his black cape fluttering in the air behind him.

Bastian let out a sigh and rubbed his temples. He took a deep breath, then closed the massive doors to the throne room behind him. He patted his sword on his hip and made his way back to Connor.

"I think we're as safe as we're going to be. Why don't you head back and get the eggs?"

The great blue dragon dipped its head, then took flight. His wings spread, the talons on the point of his wings mere whispers away from scraping the walls.

Without a sound, he flew out the window and ascended until Bastian couldn't see him.

Bastian looked around the throne room. Stacia's body was gone. So was Henry's, the golden dragon who'd fought against her and foolishly lost in only a moment. He was Jarrett's charge, or friend. Bastian wasn't clear which it was. The boy had been trained poorly and lost his life for it. If that was the kind of protector Jarrett was, then Tressa wasn't safe with him.

Not that it mattered what Bastian thought. She'd been gone for days now and hadn't come back. Her promises to return weren't as solid as he'd once assumed. Leaving the fog had changed her, and he wasn't sure he liked the new Tressa.

Still, he loved her, and there was a chance she was in trouble. What kind of a man would he be if he didn't check on her now that he had the power to do so? Bastian flung the doors open. The guards stood silent, ignoring him.

Bastian cleared his throat.

Still, they didn't acknowledge him.

"Is there someone I can send out on a reconnaissance task?" he asked.

The men's backs remained rigid, their eyes trained on the hallway.

Bastian strode out of the throne room and stood nose-to-nose with the man on the right. "Get someone who can help me, now."

The man's eyes shifted toward the healer on the other side of the door. That man nodded imperceptibly. The healer's arms dropped, he stepped around Bastian, and walked down the hall without a word.

"Who's in charge here?" Bastian asked aloud. The remaining healer

didn't answer. He didn't twitch. It was as if Bastian didn't exist.

Annoyed, he went back into the throne room and slammed the doors behind him.

Chapter 20

Tressa lay on a bed, surrounded by emerald and sapphire silken pillows, her arms wrapped protectively around her stomach. She'd been a little sick the last few days. The healers at the castle attributed it to her wild flight with the dragon.

Queen Jacinda had visited her a few times. She wasn't exactly kind, but she hadn't been rude to Tressa yet. Perhaps Jarrett had overstated her jealousy.

Tressa's eyes wandered to the doorway of her chamber. She'd been ordered to stay. To rest and heal. To let the guards outside her door know if she needed anything.

Guards. She still wasn't allowed to leave. Not until Jarrett arrived. Jacinda had made that very clear. Tressa wasn't clear on why she was being held. Jacinda told her she'd sent the golden dragon to scoop Tressa out of the desert so she could avoid the unforgiving dry heat. Every time she'd asked why they hadn't brought Jarrett at the same time, someone would change the subject.

For two days, she lay in the room. Food was delivered at regular intervals. Beautiful, scrumptious oranges and lemons, with pheasant roasted in pineapple juice. She'd never tasted such varied and glorious meals. Clean clothes were brought. A tub was prepared for her every night. Women brushed her hair and braided it. They anointed her skin with oils.

Tressa felt like a queen. A captive one, but when Jarrett arrived, she'd be set free. At least that's what they promised.

The door opened without a knock. A maid slipped in the room, her face flush, her cheeks bright red. "He's here. Your promised. He has arrived."

Tressa leapt to her feet and ran to the window. She looked out on the grand concourse. Sure enough, Jarrett's caravan had made it to Risos. She waved to him, tossing flower petals off the balcony, but he didn't see her. She was too high up, too far away.

"Does he know I'm here?" she asked the servant girl. The same girl had tended to her, and gossiped with Tressa, since she'd been shut up in this room. Tressa had worried about Jarrett, confiding in this girl

how much she was beginning to miss him. Being apart from Jarrett was more difficult with each sun. Tressa was surprised how much she had missed him.

"I don't know," the girl said. She pulled her hands out from behind her back, revealing a basket laden with flowers and oils. "But I'm sure you'll see him soon. Let's make you beautiful."

Tressa sat still while the girl braided her hair yet again in another intricate pattern. Had circumstances been different, she would have begged the girl to teach her. Weaving was Tressa's specialty. Instead, she sat quietly, letting the girl pamper her. Fragrant oils were brought out, rubbed up and down her arms. Her feet and legs were slathered in the oil, the girl's expert hands massaging out all the kinks and worries collecting in Tressa's muscles.

A knock at the door startled both of them. It was the first time anyone had awarded her the courtesy. "Come in," Tressa said.

She looked at the slave who mouthed, "Jarrett."

The door flung open and Jarrett strode in. Covered from head to toe in sand, he unwrapped the scarf around his head, flinging hard granules in the air.

Tressa's instinct was to cover her mouth against the flying sand. Instead, she fought it and ran into Jarrett's outstretched arms. She nuzzled her head into his shoulder. He smelled of camel and cinnamon. It was the sweetest thing she'd ever sniffed.

"Jarrett!" Despite wanting to maintain her composure, tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm here." He grabbed Tressa's shoulders and pushed her back. "Are you okay?" His eyes looked her up and down, concern radiating from his eyes.

Tressa dipped her chin. Fear flooded through her. Now that Jarrett was here, she let down her guard and admitted she'd been scared. "Jacinda..."

"What about me?" The queen swept into the room. "I've done nothing but keep you in the finest clothes and offered you the most gracious hospitality." She stood with her arms crossed, waiting for Tressa to challenge her. Jacinda's frown morphed into a scowl. "Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it. Now that you're here, I want to know," Jacinda craned her neck, looking over Jarrett's shoulder, "where is my son?"

Jarrett's grip on Tressa's shoulders tightened. She kept the smile on her face, though her happiness at being reunited with Jarrett had melted into fear. Tressa had no idea what Jacinda would do when she found out her son was dead.

"Jacinda," Jarrett said, "Maybe we should speak privately. Let's allow Tressa some time to rest. She shouldn't be dealing with matters

of state."

Jacinda's eyes narrowed. "No." She looked back and forth at Jarrett and Tressa. "Tell me now. Where is Henry? Did he capture the throne? I haven't received word yet."

Jarrett stood in front of Tressa, shielding her.

"Jarrett, my pet, don't hold out on me." Jacinda's voice dripped with poison-tinged sweetness.

Tressa stared at Jarrett's back, wishing she could give him strength. Or that she could fly them out of there, just as the golden dragon had plucked her from her camel. But they were at a disadvantage, completely at Jacinda's mercy.

"Henry is dead." He said it without emotion. "He was too young for the mission and I tried to tell you that before you sent us. He wasn't ready. He couldn't control his dragon—"

Jacinda cut him off. "Don't speak of that." She glared at Tressa over Jarrett's shoulder.

"She knows," Jarrett said. "Henry changed in front of her. There was nothing I could do. In fact, Tressa has kept his secret. No one else knows."

Jacinda snorted. Like a dragon. And why not? If Stacia was a dragon and Henry was a dragon, then surely Jacinda was too. Tressa's skin tingled, bumps crawling from her wrists to her shoulders. So far, the dragons she'd met were all a little crazy or cruel. She thought of Connor, his sandy hair and quiet smirk, and the way he roughhoused with his son, how he held the baby so carefully. Would he succumb to the dragon's fire as well?

"He was a tad immature, I'll grant you that." Jacinda waved a hand in the air, her golden tipped nails sparkling in the sun. "Luckily I have another son, Harib. The one who so graciously brought Tressa here. We will nab that Blue throne yet."

Jarrett cleared his throat. "Actually, Stacia is dead."

Jacinda clapped her hands together and laughed. "This is wonderful news. I'll send men right away to set up a regency before the other dragonlords can get there. Tell me who killed that horrid bitch."

Jacinda stared at Tressa, then switched her penetrating gaze to Jarrett. "No." A nervous laugh fell from her lips. "Not her. Not the whore who tricked you into bed and into a marriage proposal. Impossible. She's just a girl."

"It's true," Tressa said, shocked Jacinda was more upset about this than her son's death. True, Henry was a prick, but Jacinda was his mother. Did she care for no one?

"How?" Jacinda sank onto a pillowed settee. "Tell me." She draped her arms over the back of the bench.

Tressa took a deep breath. "I knew the dragon, I mean Stacia, was going to kill me whether or not I fought back. So I did the best I could."

Jarrett smiled, picking up her story. "You should have seen her. She fought better than most men when tested by an unknown beast. Even here, no one would dare stand up to our dragons."

"It's because they know better." Jacinda muffled a yawn. "This girl is clearly a fool."

"She's the bravest woman I've ever met." Jarrett's eyes softened as he looked back at Tressa.

Her stomach flipped. Three days away from the man, and she felt like a silly girl in his presence.

"It wasn't just me," Tressa said, hoping to take some of the attention off herself. "During the battle—"

"I stepped in," Jarrett said. He placed a hand on Tressa's arm and gave her a knowing look. "But Tressa did all the fighting. She dealt the death blow."

So he didn't want her to mention the other dragon. Maybe it was for the best. They didn't even know where he was now. Hopefully he had flown to safety.

"I will immediately send my best men to Ashoom to take the throne." Jacinda folded her arms across her chest. "And the two of you. I want you gone. Take this trash back where you found her. I have no use for either of you."

"Jacinda," Jarrett sat next to her on the settee. His thigh touched hers; his hand found its way to her knee. Tressa felt a stab in her gut. She had no claim over Jarrett. Jacinda was his lover. He was only keeping up the ruse to protect her.

"I didn't come here to flaunt Tressa in front of you," Jarrett said. "I came here to tell you about Henry and to beg for your help."

Jacinda's shoulders softened. Her face lost the pinched look she'd had since Tressa first laid eyes on her. "My help? What do you need me for? You have chosen another."

The pained look in her eyes told Tressa the truth. She had loved Jarrett. Deeply.

"I need to talk to you about the village of Hutton's Bridge," Jarrett said.

Jacinda's angry mask snapped back onto her face, her eyes blazing and her lips pursed. "Not that again. Your trollop over there tried to tell me she was from Hutton's Bridge. It's clearly a lie. Hutton's Bridge is lost to us."

"It's not." Jarrett grabbed Jacinda's hands, refusing to let her yank them back. "The fog has dissipated."

"No." Jacinda whispered. "It cannot be true."

"It is. The villagers are missing. So is the honey."

"Of course the villagers are missing. They've all been dead for eighty years." Jacinda gave up the struggle against Jarrett and left her hands in his, squeezing hard, drawing on his strength. "They are dead, aren't they?" she asked Tressa.

She simply shook her head.

"Have you been making honey all this time?" Jacinda's voice rose an octave.

"Yes," Tressa said, "but Jarrett has yet to explain to me why the honey is so important. I keep telling him there is nothing special about it."

Jacinda's nostrils flared. "You're such an ignorant child." She looked to Jarrett. "I swear, I do not understand why you have chosen her. If I had an inkling that you didn't care for her, I'd..."

"You'd what?" Tressa planned to draw Jarrett's sword from its sheath if she had to. She may not have been born a fighter, but over the last few months, that was what she'd become.

"I'd kill you." Jacinda said.

"I've killed one dragon," Tressa said through gritted teeth.

Jacinda laughed. "I am not afraid of a little girl. And I am nothing like Stacia. She was young. Weak. Barely able to control her power. The only reason she remained queen for years was because Hutton's Bridge cut her off from the rest of the Dragonlands. The Sands has the most powerful fleet. We control the seas. No one went in, or out, of the Blue without my permission."

"Jacinda, please," Jarrett said, coaxing her to look at him. He shot Tressa an angry look. "We have to focus on what's important. The honey. It's gone."

"We must know where the honey has been taken," Jacinda said. "For one to have so much control...they must be stopped."

"And my people must be found," Tressa said.

"Your people are not of my concern," Jacinda said. She sprang to her feet. "I must arrange for an envoy investigate in Hutton's Bridge and look for clues to the honey's whereabouts."

Tressa stood. "When do we leave?"

"Leave?" Jacinda's eyebrows rose. "You're staying here with Jarrett. As my guest until such time as you can be married."

Guest? Tressa kept her anger closely guarded. She was no guest and they all knew the truth of it. "Jarrett?" She appealed to her only ally. "We should go. No one knows Hutton's Bridge better than I do. I must be allowed to help."

His dark brown eyes were sad. "No, I think Jacinda is right. You saw as well as I did what lurked in the village. I don't want to risk anything happening to you."

Tressa wanted to yell, stomp, scream, but she knew the last word had been given. There would be no changing their minds. Resigned, she sat down in the nearest chair, sinking into the silken finery, her heart aching.

Chapter 21

This was worse than any day Tressa had spent in Hutton's Bridge, hidden in the magical fog. She could have left of her own volition, even though she believed it likely meant death. Here, the exit was blocked by three guards who stood sentry outside her doors all day and all night.

She knew because she'd periodically tried leaving. Once in the morning after Jacinda and Jarrett had left her there. Not long after eating her supper. And again in the middle of the night when she'd woken from an unremembered nightmare. It had left her in a cold sweat, panic racing through her veins, but she couldn't recall even a moment of the horror that had forced her from sleep. Something joyous had been ripped away from her, but that was all she knew. No matter how hard she tried to remember, the details slipped away.

In a panic, she'd rushed the door, flinging the heavy gold-plated door open, only to see three very wide-awake guards standing outside her room, their arms crossed over their naked chests, their muscular legs stemming from short skirts. Sandals bound to their ready feet. Instead of charging them, she slunk backward into the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

What was the point in fighting? They'd only overpower her. Leo had taught her to walk away from a fight she couldn't win.

Tressa had snuggled into the pillows, pulling the silken sheet up to her chin, letting it catch the silent tears that streamed down her cheeks.

She'd never felt so alone. Even Jarrett hadn't come back. She'd assumed he'd join her at night to keep up the guise of their relationship. Instead the night only greeted her with a dark silence, the sky pinpointed with starlight.

In the morning, Tressa broke her fast with an assortment of fruit brought in by a silent servant, some she could now name, like pineapple and kiwi. Others tempted her with luscious juice and brilliant colors. She hadn't even seen some of the colors before and marveled at how strange and beautiful the world outside of Hutton's Bridge could be.

When the door opened, she didn't jump to her feet to thank the intruder for the visit. Instead, she glanced up with an uninterested eye. Jarrett stood in the doorway, his eyes weary. Bags punctuated his lower eyelids, dark as the night and heavy as Tressa's heart.

"I'm sorry I didn't come last night. There was business to be tended to." Jarrett shut the door behind him and sank down next to her.

"It's kind of you to visit me in my cell." Tressa refused to give him any thanks. If he held so much sway, he should have been able to buy her some freedom. What good was being his supposed betrothed if she was only to be kept prisoner in Risos? They might as well have told everyone the truth — that she was only a friend and he was helping her.

A stab in her heart reminded Tressa there was another reason she was angry with Jarrett. They'd been separate for days. She wanted to see him. Spend time with him.

Jarrett sighed and scratched his goatee. "I am truly sorry about this. Jacinda is behaving poorly, but she is the ruler here. There is little I can do to set you free."

"You have plenty of freedom." Tressa tossed a kiwi slice on the platter. "I seem to remember you lecturing Henry about how to treat a woman, how his mother would be disappointed in him for attempting to assault me. If she's so keen on women and how they're treated, then why am I being treated as a criminal?"

Jarrett laughed. "If you think this is where the criminals are kept, then you need to learn more about Jacinda."

Tressa scowled and pursed her lips. She'd done little more than sit around for days, waiting for him to arrive. She picked up the kiwi again and popped it into her mouth. "I was kept in here, a virtual prisoner. I'm not a criminal, and yet I was treated as one under house arrest." She wanted to anger Jarrett. She wanted to hurt him for bringing her to the Sands and subjecting her to this. Surely there could have been another place to go to ask for help. Not everyone in the Dragonlands could be evil.

Jarrett unballled his fists and wiped his hands on a cloth napkin, getting the dredges of strawberry out from between his fingers. "I didn't have any other options. The Blue has been dismantled. It's likely pure chaos in the Drowned Country now. North to Malum? Absolutely not. Northwest to the Meadowlands? Those people have never picked up a weapon in their lives. They simply ignore all war, and they equally eschew all pleas for help. They are neutral at best, uncaring at worst."

"There's another, isn't there?" Tressa asked. "The Charred Barrens where the Black Throne resides?"

Jarrett made a strange gesture with his hand, his first two fingers

fanned into a V. He held them in front of his lips for a moment. "We do not speak of the Ruins of Ebon."

"Why not?" Tressa asked, eating more fruit. Her hunger couldn't be slaked. As her irritation with him abated, her appetite grew.

"It is an evil land, one where death reigns. To enter the Charred Barrens is to die."

"If Jacinda won't help us, we should leave. We're wasting time, Jarrett. My people are out there somewhere and I need to find them." She placed a hand on his arm and squeezed. "Please."

"Don't you think I know that?" He exploded. "I don't know any other way to protect you. Calling you my promised saved your arse. If Jacinda thought for a second that I didn't love you..."

"She'd kill me, wouldn't she?" Tressa asked, sure she knew the answer.

"I still feel like you're in danger. If we were already married, then perhaps Jacinda would give us what we wanted. A few men to investigate the whereabouts of your people. Freedom."

Tressa's anger abated a bit. Marrying Jarrett out of convenience would be a good solution if it truly meant her freedom. If they both understood up front it was only a formality, then it might work. She had feelings of some kind for him. Something stirred deep inside and she did feel a modicum of jealousy when he was around Jacinda. But that wasn't enough to marry a man. Yet, if it could help her find her people and restore some normality, she might consider it. "Would you do that for me? And after I left, could you somehow repudiate me? I don't want you to be tied to me forever. I'd hate to ruin your life like that."

Jarrett sank back down to his knees in front of her. "Tressa, I have lived all over the Sands. I have met and been with many women. There isn't one I would rather marry than you." He leaned over, kissing her on the lips.

She gasped, then returned the kiss with a fervor she hadn't known existed. Tressa's fingers lost themselves on the back of Jarrett's neck. His lips pushed into hers, insistent. Hers responded with deep longing, her tongue inviting him to taste her. Jarrett rested his hand on her hips, his thumbs dangerously close to a place she'd kept only for Bastian.

Bastian!

Tressa jerked back. "I'm sorry. I just..." She licked her lips, a blush spreading from her neck up to her cheeks.

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." Jarrett backed away a few steps. "You don't think of me that way. I already knew that. I won't take advantage of you."

She held out a hand to him, her fingers shaking. "It's not that I

don't think of you like that...I just...I feel like there's other things left unsaid. I shouldn't be doing this with you when there's another who thinks I'm waiting for him."

Jarrett nodded. "I understand." He smiled. "It's just another thing I love about you. Your unerring loyalty. I should go. There are plans to be made. Are you truly willing to go along with the wedding?"

"Yes, as long as you understand I cannot truly make any promises to you. Not yet."

His smile was tempered by reality. "Of course. And you know I won't ever make you do anything you don't want to do."

Jarrett winked, then exited the room, leaving Tressa's chest heaving for air. What had she almost done?

Chapter 22

Bastian sat on the throne he'd righted the day before. He'd

spent most of the day cleaning up the mess Tressa and Jarrett had made fighting Stacia. Nothing was where it should have been. The throne was upside down behind the door. Cups and plates, along with flung food and spilled wine, were scattered across the floor. Chairs that once held dignitaries and guests were upended. He couldn't believe they'd just left it this way. Yes, the dragon bodies of Stacia and Henry were gone, cleaned up by the Black Guard likely, but had no one cared enough to restore the room to its proper glory? Where were the workers? Someone had to be in control of it.

No one had reported back on Hutton's Bridge or Tressa and the only time he'd seen another person was when a cloaked man brought his dinner and another a meal to break his fast that morning. Neither had spoken to him, or so much as looked at him.

A knock at the door surprised him. "Enter," he called, trying to sound official.

The doors flung open. "Bastian!" The stomp of Elinor's boots echoed in the throne room as she ran toward him and flung herself into his arms.

He held onto her and spun her around, so happy to see someone other than the silent black robed healers outside his door. He put her down, and her cheeks flushed pink.

"I'm sorry." She smoothed out her dress and took a couple of steps back. She looked up at him through fluttered eyelashes. "I was just so happy to see you safe."

"Safe," he asked. "Why wouldn't I be safe?"

She rubbed her hands together. "When Connor came back to the cave and was taking the eggs one by one to the castle, I was worried for your safety. All alone here with just a few wimpy healers. What if the Black Guard had revolted? What if the townspeople stormed the castle?"

Bastian's eyebrows furrowed. "The men in the Black Guard were annoyed and left once they saw Connor. They haven't been back. And why would the townspeople revolt?"

"I don't know. I was just concerned." Elinor shrugged, the blush spreading deeper. "Silly, I know. I always get worried about my patients." She surveyed the room. "I thought everything was destroyed after the battle."

Bastian shrugged. "Not destroyed, but definitely a mess. I tried to clean it up. There was nothing else for me to do other than sit and wait."

"Any news about Tressa or Hutton's Bridge?" Elinor asked as she strolled around the room, her hands behind her back.

Bastian admired her sure, steady gait, as if she owned the world. Few women had that kind of confidence where he came from. Few, except Tressa. She was the only girl who'd ever been worth fighting for – even though she never needed his help.

"No news," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I'm hoping someone comes soon with a message. I asked yesterday afternoon and one of your healer friends ran off. I thought that meant they were going to look into it."

Elinor sighed and ran her fingers through her blond ringlets. "Sometimes my colleagues can be a bit narrow. If they assume Tressa is well, they may not worry about her as much, as, say the dragon eggs."

"But I'm their new leader, and I care about Tressa."

"You love her," Elinor said, her voice soft.

"I do," Bastian said.

She laid a tiny hand on his arm. "But they don't love her. Healers don't love the same way everyone else does."

Bastian tilted his head. "I don't understand. You're just like me, aren't you?"

"In flesh and bone, yes." She took her hand away, leaving a warmth in her wake. "But we are unlike you in so many ways. I was chosen at birth to be a healer. My life is not the same as yours."

Bastian laughed. "I grew up in a town surrounded by a magical fog. My childhood wasn't like that of anyone else here."

Elinor's eyes darkened. She looked toward the door, then back at Bastian, her voice lowered. "There are...things...that others do not know about the healers."

"I suspect that's true considering your healing magic only renews once every moon."

"That is true, and it's only one grain in a beach filled with countless layers of sand." Elinor grabbed Bastian's hand and tugged.

He followed, stumbling over his feet as she took off in a run toward a chaise on the far end of the room, closest to the window where Connor had taken flight the day before.

"I think we can trust my fellow healers."

"Think?" Bastian asked, concerned. His eyes darted toward the door and back to Elinor again. Her hand shook in his, so he reached for her other hand. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

She looked up at him, her blue eyes so big and trusting. "Can I? I barely know you, but something inside me whispers, telling me that you can hear my secrets and never breathe a word of them to anyone else."

"Of course, Elinor. What is it?" His curiosity was definitely piqued. What secrets could she be hiding about the healers that were so bad she couldn't let anyone else hear?

Elinor pulled his hand to her chest. "Do you feel my heart? It's pounding."

He could feel her heart and the swell of her breast just below. He thought of Fotia, the little dragon, and of his dead wife Vinya, anything other than how badly he wanted to let his thumb dip just a tiny bit farther south.

Bastian pulled away and took Elinor's face in his hands. "What is it?" He gazed into her eyes, noticing the curve of her lips and the one small tear that threatened to spill over her light blond lashes.

The doors burst open. Bastian dropped his hands and Elinor sniffled and wiped away the tear.

"What is it?" he asked the intruder, angrier than he'd intended.

"We have word of Hutton's Bridge, and you're not going to like it," the man in the black hooded cloak said.

"Yes?" Bastian prompted him, tired of waiting for answers. Everything was a damn mystery.

"The village is empty, sir. No one remains." The man lifted his hands into the air. "We were prepared to bring villagers here and heal them, but it appears they've all left."

Bastian rubbed his temples, dreading the answer to the next question. "Tressa and Jarrett, did you find them?"

"No," the healer said, shaking his head, "but we believe based on tracks that they left for the Sands."

"Together?" Bastian asked, trying to hold his anger back. "Did they leave together or did one set of tracks head back here?" He wanted the answer to be two different sets of tracks headed in opposite directions. He wanted to believe Tressa was on her way back to him and not forging ahead with that other man.

"There were tracks for two horses, sir, both headed toward the northwest."

"That will be all. Leave us," Bastian said. Inside, he was aching, torn apart with the knowledge Tressa had left him again.

Bastian didn't watch the man leave. Only the thud of the doors closing tight told him that he was alone with Elinor again.

“I’m sure she had a good reason,” Elinor told him quietly.

“She can’t even be bothered to send me a message, can she?” Bastian’s heart thumped in his chest. Anger roiled inside him like a storm on the verge of shooting out thousands of lightning bolts. “One little pigeon, that’s all it would take. Just to tell me why she keeps leaving.”

“I don’t understand it,” Elinor said. “If you loved me, nothing could keep me away from you.”

Bastian looked at the girl, no woman, standing in front of him. She said she’d meet him at the castle as soon as Connor had gotten all of the eggs. She’d saved his life and taken him to safety. She’d given him a throne. More importantly, she followed through on every one of her promises.

He was attracted to Elinor, there was no question about that. But he’d promised Tressa they’d be together. Everything he’d done was for her. Until he knew for sure she’d left him, he’d have to hold back any attraction. He couldn’t give up on her now.

Bastian turned to Elinor. “I know you were about to tell me something about your childhood with the healers. Can it wait?” He took a deep breath and let it out. “The people of Hutton’s Bridge are missing and we need to find them. If Connor will agree, I’ll fly with them to search for any sign of the villagers. I didn’t take down the fog and save their asses only to have them all disappear.”

“Can I come with you?” Elinor asked. “You never know if you’ll need a healer.”

He took her hand in his and he was reminded how soft it was. “Yes. I may need you.”

Chapter 23

Water dripped on their heads, wetting the stone walkway

beneath their feet in the tunnels under Ashoom. It smelled like the bottom of a dank pond and was rife with insects. Bastian swatted one from his face and blew another away from his lips.

"Do you think we're close?" he asked Elinor.

She tiptoed behind him, despite wearing boots that were perfect for the ripe environment. "I hope so. Are you sure this is the right way?"

Bastian laughed. "Connor had told me where the entrance to the caves underground was. Have you noticed any turns we missed?"

"No..." Elinor's voice trailed off. "This is creepy."

"Did you expect a dragon's lair to be decorated with bows and glitter?"

She punched his arm. "Shush."

They trudged along for a few more breaths in relative silence. Bastian wondered if the scratching of mice on the ground was scaring her. Better not to bring it up in case she hadn't noticed. Women could be sensitive about little things like that, even though there was nothing to fear.

A tickle on Bastian's leg drew his attention downward. He stopped and bent over. A spider, almost as large as his hand, had settled on his calf.

"Get it off," he yelled, shaking his leg. It didn't budge and even seemed to look up at Bastian as if it wondered why he was so shaken. He bent over, grabbed a few pebbles from the floor, and threw them at his leg, wishing desperately he was outside and could grab a stick. There was no way he was touching it.

Elinor laughed. "It's just a wolf spider. It won't hurt you." She bent over and placed her hand next to the spider. It skittered onto her palm. "There, you poor thing. I'm sorry the big man was trying to hurt you." Elinor ran her fingers over the spider's hairy body.

"It just surprised me, that's all," Bastian said. "Plus, I wasn't sure if it was poisonous. I didn't come this far to die from a spider bite."

Elinor laughed again. "You can't die. Not from that, at least."

He looked at her quizzically. "What do you mean I can't die?"

Elinor's smile faded. "Nothing. I misspoke. What I mean was, I'm here to heal you if anything happens, so of course, you won't die." Her smile came back in the form of a smirk. "You can count on me to protect you, Bastian."

He wasn't sure how to respond. One moment she was sweet and endearing and the next he wanted to box her ears like his mother had done to him when he talked back as a child. "I'm sure we'll both be fine if we protect each other." He made sure to emphasize the end of the sentence, letting her know he intended on watching her back too. He just hoped there weren't any gigantic spiders on it.

"Let's keep moving," he said.

Elinor kissed the spider while Bastian shuddered. Then she set it down on the ground. "Go that way, little guy." She shooed him in the direction they'd come from.

A handful of steps later, they stood at the entrance to a cavern. Bastian's candle illuminated the chamber, sparkling in pinks and yellows as the light bounced off the stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

Thirteen smaller niches punctuated the chamber. All but one contained an egg — the same eggs from Connor's cave in the woods.

"Connor? Fotia?" Elinor called. Her voice echoed.

Bastian took another step in and then another. He was greeted by a high-pitched squeal and a nip at his ankles. "Fotia!" He leaned over and laid a hand on the little dragon's scaly head. He had to admit, he'd missed her. She'd grown on him, reminding him of his own daughter, Farah, in a strange dragon way. "Where's Connor?"

Fotia pranced over to Elinor, the little dragon's forked tongue lolling out the side of her mouth. She slobbered and rubbed her head into Elinor's legs. Elinor dropped to a squat and cooed at Fotia. "Where's your daddy?"

The two must have bonded after Bastian left to claim the throne. They seemed even more playful than before. It reminded Bastian of how he'd played with Farah. Yet another person he loved and had lost. If the villagers were gone from Hutton's Bridge, then his daughter was too. He had to find her. Frustration welled up in him. He'd spent all his time since leaving Hutton's Bridge trying to secure their safety. If he, Connor, and Tressa had stayed put, had accepted Udor's new declaration that no one was forced to leave the fog, then they would all still be safe at home.

If only he wouldn't have let his love and concern for Tressa overwhelm his good sense. He couldn't bear to watch her walk into the fog and to her death. No, he'd chosen to go with her. Die together. It was a noble and honorable act. One that she'd repeatedly scorned

by leaving him every time she got the chance.

He huffed and refocused on his mission. He had to find Connor so they could circle above the land and look for the villagers. They couldn't be hard to miss. A group of a couple hundred trekking wearily across the forest. He'd told them only death awaited them at Ashoom. It was no surprise they'd chosen to leave Hutton's Bridge in a different direction.

What was shocking was that Udor and Carrac, and some of the older people hadn't stayed. Why had they all left so quickly? Had someone seen Bastian get captured? And what had happened to the rest of his men?

The little dragon danced around Elinor and Bastian's feet. She grabbed the bottom of Elinor's skirt and tugged on it, dragging her further inside. There they found Connor, curled up in one of the side chambers. He'd nestled into a pile of straw, covering his naked body.

Bastian laid a hand over Elinor's eyes, but she slapped it away. "I'm a healer. I've seen plenty of naked men before." She looked up at Bastian, a twinkle in her eye. "Even you. Who do you think got you dressed after I healed you?"

It hadn't occurred to him when Elinor helped him escape from Ashoom days ago. The bloodstained, battle-worn clothes he'd been wearing were gone. Bastian eyed Elinor, but didn't ask any further questions.

He turned his attention back to Connor. His chest moved up and down in the quiet rhythm of a deep sleep.

"He must be exhausted. He was flying back and forth all night with the eggs. I waited until he took Fotia and that's when I set out on foot for the castle."

Bastian cocked his head. "You must be tired too. Did you get any sleep?"

"A little here and there." Elinor smiled. "Not a full night, but enough."

"Why don't you go take a nap and when Connor awakens, we'll wake you too? I need you both at your best if we're to go on a search and rescue mission."

"Are you sure? If we wake up Connor now, he'll probably be able to fly for a bit."

"No," Bastian said. "I need him at full strength. And, trust me, you don't know Connor like I do. He may seem like a good, sweet guy but when he's overtired he can be a real bastard." Bastian patted Elinor's shoulder. "Go. I'll send someone for you when he's ready."

Elinor gave Bastian a little wave and patted Fotia on the head. "Thank you."

After she left, Bastian sank to the rocky floor, wrapping his arms

around one bent leg. "I guess it's just you and me, Fotia." The little dragon hissed and puffed a burst of smoke from her nose. Bastian laughed and settled in for the morning.

Chapter 24

A while later, a nearby crunching noise woke Bastian. He shook his head, completely unaware he'd fallen asleep. He looked down. Fotia's head was nestled in his lap, her little mouth open, tongue lolled to the side. Bastian smiled. He couldn't help it. The little blue dragon was cute.

He slid out from underneath her, laying her head carefully on the ground. He crept over to the chamber where Connor had been sleeping. His friend was awake, his head cradled in his hands.

Bastian kept his eyes high, giving Connor his privacy. "We should keep a change of clothes down here for you."

"That would come in handy."

"Headache?" Bastian asked.

Connor looked up. "Yeah. Feels like something's crushing it. Do you suppose it might explode?"

Bastian laughed. "Never seen it happen before, so I doubt it."

"Neither of us has any experience with this dragon changing phenomenon. Maybe my head will explode and turn into something else."

"I certainly hope not," Bastian said. "I'm having enough trouble getting used to you as a dragon."

"It's not easy for me either," Connor said with a drop of his head. "Even though I don't remember anything before Stacia brought me back from death, or near death, deep down I know this life isn't mine. Things are missing. Important things. My wife. My sons. You spoke of them, but I have no recollection of them. Nor do I have any feelings toward them. That's not right."

It wasn't. Yet in a way, Bastian envied him. If only he could forget all those feelings for Tressa that were causing him so much trouble. "If I knew how to bring your memory back, I would. If I knew how to change you back to the man I knew, I'd do it," Bastian said.

Connor held up a hand. "I don't want to go back."

"But if you could remember –"

"Bastian, stop." Connor said. "If I am the man you say I am, then you know I wouldn't want to lose this." His arms spread wide,

gesturing at all the chambers surrounding them. "I would take responsibility for the eggs and Fotia. This is what I do. This is who I am, whether or not I remember my past."

Bastian wanted to give a well-phrased retort. But Connor was right. He would want to make sure everyone was safe. It was ingrained in his personality. He cared for everyone, large or small.

"Then let me give you a chance to show you still care for those in your past. The healers sent someone out to investigate Hutton's Bridge. There's no one left in the village. Your wife and sons. My daughter. The others who lived with us in peace, they are all missing."

Connor's eyebrows rose. "That is curious. Did they say anything about which direction they'd gone? Why the mass exile?"

"No, there was no evidence."

"Strange."

"I know. I was hoping you'd agree to change into your dragon form and fly Elinor and me around. See if we can find them." Bastian kept it short and simple. No appeals about Connor's boys or wife. He wouldn't pressure his friend.

Connor strolled past the chambers, each housing an egg. He didn't seem to mind his nakedness, so Bastian pretended like his friend was fully clothed and followed him through the cave tunnel. Connor paused at each egg, laying a hand on the rough blue eggshells.

"You said only one is yours," Bastian said. "Who do the rest belong to?"

Connor sighed. "Other men Stacia took. By what means, I don't know. They were all dead by the time I came around. Each one of their bodies was wrapped around an egg. That might have been my fate, too, if Tressa hadn't killed Stacia. I buried them." He pointed to a mound in the back of the cave.

Bastian shuddered. Twelve eggs left. One was Connor's. The rest of the fathers had been sacrificed for Stacia's new army. Bastian's gut turned. She had told him he wasn't worthy, but later said she might consider him. If she'd followed through on that threat, he might have been the one to find Connor and been forced to bury his best friend.

Connor spun and faced Bastian. "We will fly out to find the villagers, but then I must return here. There is no one else to care for the eggs. I will meet you and Elinor in the throne room soon."

Bastian clapped Connor on the shoulder. "We'll be there. Thank you."

Connor turned back to Fotia and sank to the ground, whispering in her ear.

Bastian made his way back up to the castle proper. He paused outside the throne room. "Can you send someone to fetch Elinor?" he asked one of the healers. Or guards. Whatever they were.

The man ignored him, looking straight through Bastian.

"Did you hear me?" Bastian asked again, the anger boiling. He'd sworn not to erupt at these men. They were there to protect him, after all, but their disregard was baffling. He clenched his fists at his sides, forcing himself not to grab the man by the collar and throw him up against the wall. Instead, he turned to the second guard. "Can you please fetch Elinor?"

That man blinked twice. Other than that, not even an acknowledgment.

Bastian was about to scream at them when he heard someone approaching from behind. He whirled around. Elinor scurried down the hall, her black cape flapping behind her. She wore a blue gown and her muddied black boots.

"Are we ready to go? Did Connor agree?" she asked, breathless. "Sorry, it's a bit of a hike from the castle to my rooms at the Healer's Guild. I ran most of the way."

"How did you know I was just starting to look for you?" Bastian asked, escorting her into the throne room. He closed the doors behind him, giving the two guards a nasty look. Not that they saw him, or would have even acknowledged him if they did.

"I didn't," Elinor said. "I took a nap. I woke up. I came back. I'd rather be here with you than back at the guild. I feel like I have a purpose now." She wrung her hands together, her ivory cheeks pink. "I always knew I'd be a healer, but now, there's more. There's a reason. I saved you and look what it led to. It was the best decision I've made."

Bastian smiled. He couldn't help it. She was the sweetest woman he'd met. Her emotional honesty was refreshing.

"Connor said he'd meet us up here as soon as he was ready." Bastian put a hand on Elinor's shoulder. "Are you nervous about flying?"

Elinor gulped. "A little. Partly scared witless and another part is more excited than I've ever been about anything before." She slipped her hand into Bastian's. "But if you survived the ride here, then I won't die."

"Probably," Bastian said with a shrug.

Her eyes grew wide. "Probably?"

"I'm teasing you." Bastian chuckled. "You'll be fine. But we have one important thing to decide before Connor gets here. Do you want to ride in front of me with my arms around you or do you want to ride behind me with your arms around me?"

Elinor tapped her chin. "I don't know. Which is safer?"

"Why don't you ride in front of me?" Bastian asked. "That way you can see everything. If you're behind me, I'll block the view."

Elinor gulped again. Before she could protest, Connor flew in the

window at the other end of the room. He landed gracefully on the floor and bent on one knee.

"Ready?" Bastian asked Elinor, tugging on her hand.

She nodded.

"It will be amazing, I promise. We'll find the villagers, learn what their plan is, collect my daughter, Connor's boys and Hazel, and then we'll come right back to the castle."

Bastian helped Elinor climb up Connor's leg and onto his back. Bastian hoped it really would be that simple. He'd already gone through so much. What else could happen?

Chapter 25

Three women burst into Tressa's chambers, their arms overflowing with colorful bolts of fabric, spilling over their arms, dripping to the floor like a jewel-laden waterfall.

"You're to be married tonight, my lady," the first woman said. She swooped to the pillows, sitting next to Tressa, and thrusting silken samples into Tressa's hands. Her long black hair, braided and speckled with beads of every color, set off her mocha skin. "Which do you prefer?"

"Married tonight?" Tressa's hand flew to her mouth. He'd done it. Jarrett had come through just like he'd promised.

"Yes, my lady. Your betrothed has commanded it. I am the royal dressmaker, Adara." She pointed to the two pale women who stood quietly in the corner. "They are my assistants. I will measure you and have a gown made in time for the ceremony."

Tressa felt overwhelmed by the choices. "I don't know." She trailed her fingers over the fabric in her lap. In Hutton's Bridge, they wore their normal clothes when married. Many women were in maternity outfits by then since a wedding was only held once a woman was pregnant. It felt so strange to make a gown specifically for a ceremony.

The silk slid through her fingers like water. It was fine and soft, not at all what she'd need once she was Jarrett's wife and allowed to leave the Sands. She wanted something that she could travel in. Something that would move in battle and hide daggers in its folds. A fabric that could be soiled and wouldn't tear at the slightest injury.

"The choice is yours," Adara said, "but if I may make a suggestion." She rummaged through the pile and pulled out a fabric of burnt orange. "This would compliment your eyes and your hair."

It reminded Tressa of the sunset she'd seen the night she spent with Jarrett in the tent in the middle of the desert. He'd always been a complete gentleman with her, despite making it clear how he felt. Her heart ached a bit. Confused. Torn. In Hutton's Bridge, only Bastian had made sense. Outside the fog, her feelings were less clear.

"It's gorgeous," Tressa admitted. It might even wear better due to

its dark color. "Can you sew some hidden pockets into it?"

Adara looked at Tressa out of the corner of her eye. "What sort of pockets? For what use?"

Tressa held her breath for a moment, unsure how to respond. She couldn't just tell the woman her plans, but she hadn't thought of a good excuse first.

Adara waved to the two girls in the corner. "Leave the fabrics here. I will call you when I need you. It's time to measure Tressa and I'm sure she would like to maintain her modesty."

The two young girls nodded and filed out of the room quietly, closing the door behind them.

Adara grabbed Tressa's hands. "Is it true you're from Hutton's Bridge? And is it true you defeated the blue dragon? You must be a great warrior."

A blush colored Tressa's cheeks. "It is true, but I don't think of myself as a warrior. I'm just a girl doing what she has to do."

"Don't be so shy." Adara waved a long, graceful hand in the air. "Now, I am not only the royal dressmaker. I also construct the elaborate uniforms worn by the elite assassins in the queen's guard. I design coats and shirts and pants with hidden pockets for every kind of weapon." She winked at Tressa. "It sounds to me like a woman such as yourself would also need such an outfit. Am I right?"

Tressa wanted to trust Adara. Even if she was a spy for Jacinda, she needn't suspect Tressa was going to leave. Only that Tressa wanted to be able to protect herself. Since she was soon to be under Jarrett's control and not Jacinda's, there was no reason to pretend she'd be a meek wife.

"Yes, you are. Can you make me a gown that will hold all manner of weapons? Small ones. Like for a few daggers?" Tressa had no idea where she'd find these weapons, but hopefully Jarrett would supply her with them. "It also needs to look good belted because eventually I'll want a sword at my hip."

"Well, this is really a gown just for your wedding. You won't wear it again." Adara spread out the fabrics, all in dark colors. An opaque ruby shift shimmered in the sunlight.

"Not wear it again?" Tressa was confused. Who wore a gown only once? Especially one that a dressmaker went to so much trouble to make?

Adara laughed, her cherry lips opening to reveal a mouthful of perfectly white teeth. Her almond-shaped lids were beset with brown eyes. She was a stunning woman. "Of course your wedding gown is only worn one time. Often it doesn't survive the wedding night. Jarrett will be eager to tear your dress from your body and ravish you."

Tressa's eyes grew wide at the thought of Jarrett's hands tearing at

the neck of her dress, his lips wandering across her body. She shook her head. No, not yet. There was too much that stood between them. Her stomach lurched, a small pain traveling through her navel. Tressa sat down on the settee, sweat dripping from her brow.

"Are you okay?" Adara put a hand on Tressa's shoulder.

"I'm fine." Tressa sat up a little straighter, the pain fleeting.

"A wedding gown should be beautiful. Sweeping. Unforgettable. But if you want me to make you other dresses with secrets hidden inside, I am happy to do so. I've always wanted to try that, but never had a woman I felt was worthy of such a dress." Adara nodded, her eyes solidly on Tressa. "You are different. You are the model I've been waiting for. Tonight in your bridal suite you will find three dresses I've made for you with daggers. I can see you have no weapons now."

"Tonight?" Tressa asked, surprised. "How can you make three plus the wedding gown?"

Adara grinned again. "I am fast." She lowered her voice. "It is also possible I have thought about this extensively and have already constructed prototypes. Stand up, now. I need your measurements."

Tressa scrambled to her feet. Her head swam. Clearly she was still too tired from all of the excitement. She complied with all of Adara's instructions, standing up straight with her feet together. She held her arms out to her sides.

After a bit, Adara rolled up the strings she'd used for measuring. "This will be very good. I will have my apprentices construct your wedding gown while I tweak the other clothes." She clapped her hands together. "I'm even more excited about the warrior woman dresses than I am the wedding gown."

Tressa couldn't hold back a smile. "I am too. I can't wait to try them on."

Adara pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side. "One of them will be leather. Is that acceptable?"

"I can't wait to see it," Tressa said, truly excited. Finally, things were working in her favor.

"Someone will come back this afternoon to fit your wedding gown. Tomorrow, you try on your new dresses, and if you need anything changed, you ask for me." Adara patted Tressa's cheek. "Who knew this would be an exciting day for me as well as you?"

"Thank you for everything," Tressa said. "I appreciate it more than you know."

Adara smiled again and left Tressa alone. Soon she'd be able to leave and search for her people. Jarrett would secure the men they needed to venture into the wild. Everything was falling into place.

Tressa stood in front of the mirror, the gossamer gown draping her body but barely concealing a thing. She hadn't realized how sheer the amber fabric was until she slipped it over her head.

"I'm missing something," she mumbled.

"May I speak?" the woman standing in the corner of the room said. One of Adara's assistants, she had remained silent thus far, so much so that Tressa had forgotten she was still in there.

"Yes, please," Tressa said, smoothing the fabric over her hips. "If you know where the sheath is that goes under the dress, I'd be forever grateful." She laughed. "I certainly can't appear like this in front of everyone."

The woman glided across the room, her feet hidden under a long expanse of silk. She almost appeared to float. She straightened Tressa's dress, helping it drape across her shoulders better. "This is the full dress. There is no sheath."

Tressa looked in the mirror again. Her nipples peeked through the golden gossamer. "Oh no. There must be some mistake."

"Here in the Sands, we are not ashamed of our bodies or our sexuality. When you marry, it does not signal the end of relations with the person you love. Instead, it shows everyone in attendance exactly why you have chosen one another."

"Will Jarrett also be in something just as transparent?" Tressa asked, a blush coloring her cheeks. She'd seen him naked once before when she'd spied on the Black Guard through the bushes as they'd bathed. She hadn't shied away, instead, she'd taken a guilty moment to enjoy the view.

The woman shook her head. "No." A smile graced her face. "Though he will wear very tight pants, leaving little to the imagination." Her hand rested on Tressa's shoulder. She stood nearly a head taller than Tressa, her face hovering above Tressa's in the mirror. "Are you afraid he will find you lacking?"

Tressa couldn't help but notice the difference between her body and that of the woman behind her. Where the assistant was tall, Tressa was short. Where she was curvy, Tressa was straight. The

woman's skin glowed, but Tressa's was covered in scratches. Even her lips were still chapped. She remembered Jarrett's insistent kisses. What did he see when he looked at her?

"Jacinda is a beautiful woman and a queen," the woman went on, "but she has a temper that would give even the most lustful man pause. Jarrett has satisfied her for a long time. We attendants see what really goes on. She never fully satisfied Jarrett. He has been looking for a long time, and I believe he has found the one woman who can fulfill him."

She kissed Tressa on the cheek, her full lips soft. "You will serve him well, Tressa of the Drowned Country."

Tressa held her hands at her side, her fingers curled into fists. "May I have a few moments to myself before the ceremony?"

The woman nodded and took her leave. It was only then Tressa realized she hadn't asked the woman her name. She shook her head and sank into a nearby settee. Her hair fell around her face, tickling her cheeks. She still wasn't used to the extensions they'd woven into her hair.

"What have I gotten myself into?" Tressa asked out loud. All this to protect the lives of people she couldn't wait to be away from mere months ago.

Everything had spiraled out of control. Her feelings for Bastian were still there, but slowly Jarrett was creeping in on them. She cared for him, and she hoped it wouldn't turn into anything more than strong feelings of friendship. A slight attraction and nothing more.

A knock interrupted her thoughts. "Come in," Tressa said. She crossed her arms across her chest.

Jarrett stepped in and quickly closed the door behind him. He avoided looking at her. Instead his eyes settled above her shoulders. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I had to come."

"That's nice of you to check in on me." She felt exposed and wished she had a cloak to wrap around her body. All of her other promised garments were in Jarrett's quarters, waiting for her after the wedding.

Jarrett smiled. "Did Karina tell you what happens before the wedding?"

Tressa shook her head. "Just that I needed to get dressed." She laughed. "If you call this getting dressed. I feel a tad overexposed."

"That type of gown is traditional. I know things are bit more conservative in the Drowned Country than they are here." Jarrett sat down on the settee, still managing to avoid looking at Tressa.

She sat down next to him, her legs crossed and her arms still folded over her chest. "And in Hutton's Bridge, even more so. When your village relies on sex for procreation and not love, then sex becomes a chore."

"It's not like that here. Not at all." Jarrett's voice washed over her like a warm rain.

He had far more experience than she did. Other than her last time with Bastian, she hadn't known what it was like to be with a man for the sake of lust.

Jarrett rested a hand on her knee. Tingles traveled up to Tressa's chest.

"In the Sands, a man and a woman make love just before their marriage ceremony. That's why I'm here."

Tressa turned to look at Jarrett. His eyes were still trained on the window across the room. She wanted to answer him but wasn't sure how. She'd promised to go through with the ceremony in hopes of gaining the queen's help and favor. She'd made it clear to Jarrett that she couldn't promise anything more than friendship. Why did he continue to torture her so?

Her heart beat erratically. A throbbing between her legs screamed at her. Tressa pushed it all aside.

"If I didn't come to you before the ceremony, there would be talk. Jacinda would demand more answers. We must keep up the ruse," he said.

Tressa closed her eyes. All she could see was Jarrett naked near the pond back in the Drowned Country. She forced her eyes opened and stared at the wall.

"We'll sit here and wait until it's time to leave for the ceremony." Jarrett's hand tightened on her knee, the pressure gentle, but insistent. "But before we go out, I would like to kiss you one more time. But only if you want me to." He focused his eyes on hers.

"That would be a good idea," Tressa heard herself say without thinking it through first. "If they're expecting us to make love before coming out, we should at least look like we've done something. Flushed cheeks. Swollen lips. It wouldn't be convincing without them."

Jarrett leaned in slowly until Tressa could feel his breath on her face. "Are you sure?"

Tressa laced her fingers in his hair, pulling his face to hers. She held back at first, but the chaste kiss quickly gave way to opened lips and exploring tongues. Jarrett's hand crept up her leg, coming to rest at her hip, his thumb in the curve where her abdomen met her leg. Tressa leaned in closer, her chest pressing against Jarrett's shirt.

Jarrett's other hand rested just under her breast. He pulled back. "We should stop. I won't force you into something you don't want."

Tressa's arms tightened around his back. She didn't want to let him go. She didn't want to stop. Instead, she let her head fall on his shoulder. She didn't have the words for him. She couldn't tell him no, but she wouldn't allow herself to tell him yes.

He seemed to understand, wrapping his arms around her. "We'll just sit here until it's time. It won't be long now." He pointed out the window. "See, the sun is setting. It is almost time."

Tears threatened to spill, to give away everything she was feeling. Instead she used her emotions as a dam, waiting for what seemed like ages for another knock at the door, telling them it was time for the ceremony.

Chapter 27

"Look, over there," Elinor shouted over her shoulder to Bastian. Her hair, whipping in the wind, slapped Bastian in the face. "There are some people!"

Bastian squinted down through the trees. She was right. There were people in Hutton's Bridge! Those damn healers had lied to him. Bastian dug his heels into the dragon's sides. Connor began his careful descent with Bastian and Elinor holding on tight. Bastian wished there had been time to rig some kind of harness, but everything had happened so fast. Instead, he and Elinor could only clutch Connor's scales.

Soon they were on the ground, landing in the middle of the town square. Bastian slid off Connor's back, eager to soothe the fear his townspeople must feel at the sight of another dragon landing in their village. He held out his arms to Elinor. She slipped into his embrace. He tossed her a quick smile and then let her go. While Elinor smoothed out her dress, Bastian jogged to Connor's head. "Thank you, old friend."

Connor snorted in response.

Bastian turned to face his people, only to realize he didn't know anyone standing in front of him. Many of them had skin darker than anyone in Hutton's Bridge, reminding him of Jarrett's foreign appearance. "Who are you?" Bastian asked.

One man broke away from the group and headed over, his hand outstretched. "You must be the new leader at the Blue. I am Avital, head of this expedition sent by the Yellow Queen of the Sands to investigate the ghost town of Hutton's Bridge. I assume you are here for the same?"

Bastian took the man's hand and gave it a firm shake. "The people are gone?" He didn't bother to confirm or deny his leadership position. He barely felt like a leader anyway.

Avital shook his head. "Our own head of the guard, Jarrett, returned to Risos with his betrothed. They told us the story of the missing villagers and we were sent to investigate. Are you here for the same reason?"

"We are." Elinor held out a hand to him. "I am Elinor of the Healers Guild of Ashoom."

Avital bowed low, holding her hand in his. "Upon you be peace, healer."

"You may rise," Elinor said, and the man complied.

Bastian raised an eyebrow, but didn't say a word. He'd have to ask her about it later. He didn't realize he should have been bowing to her all the time. She was so tiny, he wasn't sure he'd be able to without falling down.

Avital looked over at Connor, lazing in the center of town. "Our dragons have flown off to the nearest pond, over to the northeast, if your dragon would like to join them for a drink."

Bastian motioned to Connor. He flew off in the direction Avital had indicated.

"Have you figured out what direction the villagers of Hutton's Bridge went?" Elinor asked, taking charge of the situation. It was just as well. Bastian felt out of his element.

"Went?" Avital laughed. "They've all been dead for decades. No one could have survived in that fog. We're here simply to investigate." He motioned to his men fanned out around the entire village. "As you see, we've recovered nothing. It's just as well. We're anxious to get back to Risos. There's a wedding tonight, and if we can make it there tonight, there may still be some feast food for us to eat."

"A wedding, how wonderful," Elinor said.

Bastian's eyes followed the men walking in and out of cottages as if nothing inside mattered. It did. This was his village, his home, and his people were missing. But giving himself away wouldn't help matters. "Perhaps I'll have a look around myself," he mumbled.

"Won't do any good," Avital said. "We've been over every inch of this ghost town. No sign of inhabitants. Nothing. It's just as we always thought. Hutton's Bridge is dead."

Bastian shrugged and made his way over to his own cottage, looking for any indication of his daughter or any of the other villagers. He opened the door to his daughter's tiny bedroom, half expecting to see Farah sitting on her bed, swinging her chubby little legs over the edge. Instead, the bed lay disheveled covered by a moth-eaten blanket. He picked it up, bringing the cloth to his nose. Before he could take a deep inhalation, a cloud of dust assaulted him.

Bastian threw the blanket down on the bed and spun around angrily. Everything was wrong. Someone had made it look like Hutton's Bridge was dead, but it wasn't. He knew his people had to be somewhere. They couldn't just vanish.

He left his cottage and looked back toward Connor, who'd flown back in, his snout wet. He was lying quietly at the edge of the village, not disturbing anyone, his cobalt tail twitching back and forth.

Elinor was deep in conversation with Avital. Her lips had lost their

regular smile, and the glimmer in her eyes was gone. She ventured a quick glance at Bastian. The sadness in her eyes struck him. He hurried back to them. "Are you okay, Elinor?"

She looked up at him. "Yes, I am. Avital here was just telling me about the wedding taking place tonight in the Sands."

"The head of our guard, Jarrett, is marrying the mystery bride he brought back with him from Ashoom. Perhaps you know her? Tressa. She has long brown hair and a quick smile. Not the type of woman I predicted Jarrett would fall for, but I guess we never know until we meet someone special."

Bastian struggled to maintain an even face. His instincts told him to grab Avital by the collar and shake information out of him. Instead, he turned to Elinor. "As friends who trade by sea, I think it would be appropriate if we flew in for this wedding, don't you, Healer Elinor?" he asked, using her formal title just as Avital had.

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Bastian. We haven't received an invitation." She shook her head, her blond curls falling over her shoulders.

Avital laughed. "No invitation needed. Queen Jacinda would be happy to see you there. Now that the fog is gone, it's time for the dragonlords to reconcile. Particularly now that the awful Stacia is dead. I'm happy to see the Blue has a new leader. Jacinda will be too. You should go."

"How long will it take us to fly there?" Bastian asked Avital, ignoring Elinor's insistent tugging on his arm.

"Most of the day, I suspect," Avital said, rubbing his goatee. "If you leave now, you should arrive just in time for the wedding."

Bastian shook Avital's hand. "Thank you so much for letting me know. I'll tell your queen how accommodating her men are."

They exchanged quick pleasantries. Avital gave Bastian a map with landmarks to guide them to Risos. But Bastian's mind was already in Risos. He had to see for himself if Tressa had truly left him for Jarrett.

Connor glided with the wind, his wings outspread, and the sun glinting off his cobalt scales. Bastian and Elinor hadn't spoken since leaving Hutton's Bridge. They'd been flying for ages with no end in sight. Underneath them sand spread out in every direction. Bastian didn't understand how anyone could live in such an unforgiving landscape. The heat alone was enough to sour the trip. The sun burned his skin and the wind only served to deepen the pain.

In front of him, Elinor kept her head covered with her hood and her head bowed to her chest. She hadn't moved in so long. He wanted to lean over and whisper in her ear. Ask if she'd ever been to the Sands before or what they could expect upon landing. But her anger at his decision to fly to the Sands cautioned him to hold his tongue.

His eyelids drifted closed, but he forced them open again. If he fell asleep, he'd fall to his death. He focused on the land below him, sand stretching in all directions. A small patch of green caught his eye, and he forgot his pledge to leave Elinor be.

"Do you see that?" he yelled in her ear, pointing toward the strange island of green sitting in the sea of sand

Elinor nodded. "It's an oasis. It might be a good idea to take a break. They should accept us since Connor is with us."

Bastian nudged Connor with his heels. The long neck swung around and Connor's huge brown eyes looked at Bastian. Bastian pointed again toward the oasis. Connor nodded his head and swooped to the side.

The green rushed toward them with the slowing beat of Connor's wings. Bastian guessed his friend had to be tired from all the flying. The break would do them all good.

Connor landed carefully just outside the oasis on a hot patch of sand. Bastian slid down and reached up for Elinor.

Instead of slipping into his arms, she turned onto her stomach and slid down Connor, landing firmly on her feet. She squared her shoulders and faced him. "Let me lead the way. The people of the Sands are accustomed to strong female leaders."

Without waiting for a response, Elinor turned on one heel. She

headed toward the oasis, her hands held out in front of her, palms up. "We come in peace, asking for hospitality."

Two guards stepped out of a nearby tent, their long, curved swords at the ready. "Speak your intentions."

"We ask only for a few moments of rest. Water for the two of us and for our dragon. We come from Ashoom and are headed toward Risos for the wedding."

A smile spread across the guard's dark face, his white teeth gleaming in the harsh sunlight. "Ah yes, Jarrett is to be married today. He and his bride passed through here just days ago. A strange girl. Not so beautiful."

Bastian's memory of Tressa hadn't dulled. She was the most beautiful woman in Hutton's Bridge. Perhaps a bit rough around the edges, but she was the only woman he'd ever really loved.

The guard shrugged. "But who can say why love strikes as it does." He sheathed his sword and held out an arm toward them. "Come and know our hospitality. We will supply you with what you require."

Elinor flashed Bastian a quick smile. It fell from her face as quickly as it had appeared.

Bastian held out a hand to her, willing to be her escort. Elinor chose to walk next to him without touching. He glanced at her again, wondering what could have made her hold back. From the moment they'd met, she had let her feelings fly free, but now she seemed closed. Women. He would never understand them.

The guard led them into a tent. The wall was covered in shimmering blue silks. A fan of feathers moved up and down above them, allowing them slight relief from the heat. Bastian looked longingly at the pillows on the floor. They beckoned, promising a quiet place to nap. Instead of giving into his exhaustion, he reached out a hand to accept the cup of water offered to him by a woman who'd entered the tent behind them.

A cool liquid streamed down the back of his throat, coating it with a soft, sweet syrup. "What is this?"

"Nectar." The woman's thick accent surprised him, along with the flowing locks of brown hair down to her waist. Her skin, as pale as his, stood out amongst the dark skinned people of the Sands. "It will not only sate your thirst, but it will also fortify you for the remainder of your journey."

"That's enough," the guard said. He didn't strike her, but his tone implied punishment if she dared speak again. She slunk out of the room, her chin dipped and her head low. "I am sorry. She does not yet know her place. The women from the Meadowlands are pliable after some time. She will learn her place."

"Is she a slave?" Elinor asked, taking a second sip from her cup.

The guard shook his head. "No, no. We don't take on slaves here. She came to us for work and we provided. But she does not have all the rights afforded to our people. After all, she is not one of us."

Elinor nodded. "We appreciate your hospitality. Without a break, I am not sure our dragon could have made the remainder of the journey."

"He is magnificent." The man looked at Bastian, his eyes quizzical. "Is he yours?"

Bastian dipped his head once. "He is."

"That means you are on the throne of the Blue."

"I am." Bastian was uncomfortable with the questioning. He still couldn't wrap his mind around the developments of the last few days. He didn't want to be a leader, nor did he want to traipse around the Dragonlands claiming to be something he wasn't. Not in his heart anyway.

"Bastian is humble," Elinor said, taking control of the conversation. "He is, in fact, the new leader of the Blue. He was instrumental in taking down Queen Stacia, along with your friend Jarrett and his bride to be. They are all very brave people." She set the cup down on a nearby table. "And we should be on our way. We don't want to miss the wedding, do we?"

Bastian watched her carefully. Her eyes were dull. She didn't mean a word of it. He opened his mouth, ready to ask her if she'd prefer to stay at the oasis rather than travel to the wedding. He thought better of it and pursed his lips together. If Elinor didn't want to go, she could say so herself. Bastian wouldn't speak for her.

"Yes," he said, setting his cup next to hers. "If our dragon has had enough water, then I am ready to continue. Thank you."

The guard smiled. "Give my best regards to Jarrett. Had I known he planned to marry the girl so quickly, I might have offered him one last night of freedom with one of the girls here. Now he'll be tied down to that surly, homely girl." He shrugged. "An odd choice when he could have had the queen."

"The queen?" Elinor raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," the guard answered. "Jarrett has long been the queen's favorite. Why he would bring around a common girl when he could have the most beautiful woman in the all the lands escapes me." The guard sighed. "I suppose Jarrett is as free as all of us." He led them out of the tent, back into the blinding sun.

Bastian wrapped his scarf around his face again, and Elinor did the same. He glanced at Connor. Water glistened around his snout and his tongue lazied out the side of his mouth. Yes, he appeared to have had his fill too.

Elinor stood next to Connor. She reached up, grabbing hold of his

scales, and attempted to hoist herself onto his back. She failed. Three times.

Bastian stood back, watching her. Why wouldn't she wait for him to help her like he had the other times?

The guard sidled up to Bastian. "Is she your concubine?"

"My..." Bastian glanced at Elinor again as she attempted a fourth try. "No, no. She's my friend." At least he hoped so.

The guard laughed again. "She is intrigued by you. Be careful with that one. She is strong, and she may not take no for an answer. You may end up her concubine before you know it."

Elinor? Interested in him? The guard was wrong. Bastian clapped him on the shoulder. "Thank you again. We will pass on your good wishes to the groom and bride." After he punched Jarrett and confronted Tressa. Maybe then Bastian would remember to wish them luck.

He strode over to Elinor. "May I help you?"

She grunted. "Fine."

Bastian placed his hands carefully under her arms and lifted Elinor onto Connor's back. She weighed no more than a child, but he could feel her curves and he knew she was no child under the layers of clothes.

"Thank you," she muttered. Her eyes lingered for a moment too long on his.

Bastian swung up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She sank into his chest, then stiffened just as quickly. Connor's wings unfurled, and within moments they were soaring in the sky again, headed toward the confrontation Bastian both anticipated and dreaded.

Chapter 29

Tressa and Jarrett held hands and walked down a long hallway

toward the garden where they would be wed. He'd promised her that as soon as the ceremony was over, she was free to do as she pleased and he would support her decisions. Tressa wanted to thank him, but she still didn't trust herself to speak. Instead she only nodded, her lips pursed.

Despite her less than innocent feelings toward Jarrett, she managed to put aside her shame. She walked to the garden with her shoulders back, baring everything to the people of the Sands with her sheer gown. To her surprise, there were no leers, no lecherous comments from the men. She'd grown used to the men of the Black Guard who bragged about their sexual escapades and spoke of women as if they were objects for lust. The people here treated her as if she were a gloriously dressed queen, despite being able to see every private part of her body through her gown.

Jarrett led her into the gentle light of the setting sun, down a path strewn with feathers and flower petals. She couldn't help smiling. She hadn't been outdoors in days, and even though the heat was still intense, a light breeze caressed her face, reminding her how much she'd missed the outside world. The crowd flanking the path stood at least ten deep. They sang a song in a language Tressa didn't understand, but their smiles told her what it meant: they were pleased with the union and wished them a beautiful future. A lump formed in Tressa's throat. It was so different than the marriage fasting in Hutton's Bridge where a man and a woman held hands in front of Udor while he pronounced them husband and wife. The villagers would sigh, knowing another life was soon to grace their trapped town, giving them hope of survival. There was no joy, only relief.

Here, there was celebration in a choice made by two people to join their lives together. Jarrett's hand tightened around Tressa's. She glanced at him. Sadness ringed his lids, while a forced smile covered his face. Tressa's heart ached. He was doing this for her and her people. He would gain nothing from it. He'd already lost Jacinda's favor. Without the queen on his side, it was possible he'd also lose his

position in the guard.

All for Tressa.

All for nothing.

She reached out and put her hand on his cheek. He halted and looked at her quizzically. There were murmurs in the crowd, but the song continued. "Thank you," Tressa said. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him.

Stunned, Jarrett stood still for a moment, then he wrapped his arms around Tressa and lifted her off the ground. His lips ground into hers, hungry. As quickly as it had started, he pulled back, setting her on the ground.

Tressa's head swam with confusion. She'd wanted to kiss him. His reaction didn't surprise her. No, what concerned her most was what was happening deep in her heart. Her feelings were rearranging, making room for a man she'd only known a short time. Mere months couldn't compete with the years and the history she had with Bastian. And yet...at that moment Tressa let herself believe the wedding was real.

The song rose louder, floating around them like a cool breeze, caressing her in happiness. She'd always wanted a selfless love. She'd had that with Bastian, at least she'd tried to fool herself into believing it for years.

Hutton's Bridge was a village with no secrets. No matter how people tried to convince themselves they'd gotten away with something, it was rare for a true secret to survive. Tressa knew about Bastian's affairs during his marriage to Vinya. She knew a handful of woman had taken refuge with him in the forge in the dark of the night. One woman had made sure Tressa knew about her nights with Bastian. She hid their affair from everyone else, but bragging to Tressa wasn't beneath her. Whether it was to hurt Tressa or to boost her own self-worth, Tressa never knew the woman's purpose.

In all that time, Tressa remained chaste in the confines of their village. She didn't break the laws, except for one time with Bastian just after their union had been dissolved. She'd tried to justify his escapades to herself. He was a man, after all. He couldn't have her, so he'd have others. She never wanted to admit that perhaps he'd never loved her as deeply as she'd loved him.

Tressa looked at Jarrett again. His muscular arms, his gentle smile, and his well-rounded arse tempted her. It wasn't just the way he looked, though. He was a good man. An honorable man. A man whose intentions she'd never questioned.

A small cramp in her stomach turned her attention away from her bridegroom. Her hand covered her stomach.

"Are you okay?" Jarrett asked, concern flashing in his eyes.

Tressa nodded. "I think so. Nerves, maybe."

Jarrett settled his hand on top of hers. "All will be well. I promise."

"How much farther?" Tressa asked. The crowds were only growing as they walked. She could no longer count the depth of the people who watched their procession.

Jarrett pointed to the right. "Just around this corner and then we'll be there." He smiled. "Be prepared. I don't think you've ever seen anything like it."

Butterflies fluttered in front of them, their wings of blue and yellow and pink coloring the dimming sky. Tressa reached out to touch one, but they scattered. A laugh escaped her lips. "They're beautiful."

"You're beautiful," Jarrett whispered and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

Tressa blushed, something she'd done far too much of in his presence. He tugged gently on her arm, guiding her around a corner.

Tressa's breath caught in her throat.

Streamers the same colors as the butterflies hung from tall poles and flapped in the breeze. Palm trees dotted the landscape, standing sentry. Plants swayed in the garden, their leaves and flowers lit up in light blues and greens, glowing in the night sky.

At the end was the most beautiful sight Tressa had ever laid eyes on. A shimmering lake stretched on for miles into the sand, giving life to the barren desert. Moonlight reflected off the light waves.

"It's stunning," she said. "I have never seen a body of water so large before!" Her body screamed, begging her to run off and jump in, letting the cool water bathe her from head to toe.

"It is our life here in the desert," Jarrett said. "Without that lake, none of us would be here."

"You seem pleased with my kingdom." Jacinda joined them on their walk. "I am still not happy about this union, but I will not have my people think me a bitter woman. If my lover has chosen another, I will celebrate your love. At least publicly." She touched Jarrett's arm with a fingernail. "Unless you want to change your mind. It is never too late. I can have this eastern trollop disposed of in mere breaths."

Tressa wanted to pull a dagger and slice Jacinda's arm. Not enough to mortally injure her, but enough to tell her to keep her mouth closed. Unfortunately this gown had no pockets. Even if it did, they would all be visible given the sheer fabric.

Jarrett's grip on Tressa's arm tightened. "I have not changed my mind, Jacinda. I am Tressa's now and forever."

A sigh escaped Jacinda's lips. "Then we will have the wedding." She glared at Tressa. "If you hurt him, I will kill you."

"I believe you," Tressa said.

Chapter 30

Bastian watched Tressa stroke Jarrett's face. When Jarrett picked her up and twirled her, Bastian's stomach dropped. Then they kissed. He knew Tressa. He knew that enamored look in her eyes. And she was nearly naked! That gown let everyone in attendance see the things Bastian had thought belonged to him alone. Not anymore.

"I've seen enough." He grabbed Elinor's wrist and tugged, but she stood firm.

"No. You haven't talked to her yet. Until then, you only know what you've seen. Often what we see isn't reality." Elinor jerked her arm free from his grasp. "Stay still and observe. Hold your emotions in check."

"No, I don't want to wait." He spun around and stalked through the crowd. He didn't care if Elinor was following him. He ignored the grunts and protests of the people around him. Soon enough he'd be out of their way and every person would be that bit closer to seeing the wedding they were all so happy to celebrate.

He stepped out of the crowd and took a deep breath. The air was harsh, like little needles piercing his throat. He hated it here, missing the wetter climate of his homeland.

"You're not leaving without me," Elinor said, running up from behind, a little smile on her face. It was the first time he'd seen it since leaving Hutton's Bridge. "If you're really ready to move on from Tressa, then I won't hold you back."

"I am." He held out his hand, and she slipped hers into it. They walked hand in hand back to the gates.

A guard stopped them. "You can't leave yet. Your presence has been requested at the wedding."

Bastian raised an eyebrow and ran a hand through his red hair. "By whom?"

"Our queen, Jacinda. Once she heard of your arrival on the blue dragon, she firmly requested you attend the ceremony. She wishes the bride to have a representative from her homeland."

"And if I say no?" Bastian asked.

The guard readied his sword. "The request will be rescinded, and

you will be escorted to our dungeon."

Bastian looked at Elinor. "They're pleasant here."

"Let's do as he asks." A resigned look settled on her face, the smile gone again.

Bastian and Elinor followed the guard back through the crowd. The same people were again jostled. They shot angry looks at the trio. "Is this good enough?" Bastian asked, stopping around the same place they'd stood earlier.

The guard looked confused. "No, you are to be in the front, with Queen Jacinda and the bride and groom." He continued pushing through the crowd, nudging bystanders with the handle of his sword.

"Oh no," Bastian said under his breath.

"We can't stop now," Elinor said. "It's this or the dungeon. I've heard rumors about the torture in the Sands. I know this is hard for you, but we have to keep moving."

Bastian gritted his teeth and followed the guard. He squeezed Elinor's hand. He'd have to rely on this tiny woman to keep him steady and levelheaded.

As they made their way to the front of the crowd, Bastian spied Tressa again. Her arm snaked through Jarrett's, their hands clasped, fingers intertwined. Her back to him, she hadn't seen her newest wedding guest.

"Ah, so glad you are here." Jacinda held out an arm to Bastian and Elinor, looking down her nose at them. "A pity we didn't have time to get clean clothes for you."

Bastian stood taller, holding Elinor's hand tighter as Tressa and Jarrett turned around. Tressa's eyes grew wide. She glanced at Jarrett, then back at Jacinda, her eyes finally settling on Bastian. "Thank you for coming," she said simply.

Bastian didn't respond.

Elinor held out her free hand to Jacinda. "Thank you for honoring us with a front row seat to the nuptials. I am Healer Elinor."

Jacinda shook Elinor's hand, then dropped it. She nodded to an attendant who brought her a towel. Jacinda wiped imaginary dirt from her hands. "It is my pleasure," she said, though her tone made it clear it wasn't.

"Now that everyone is here and both of the people being joined have representatives to witness their union, let us begin," Jacinda said.

A holy man stood, his long robes billowing about his ankles. Bastian tuned out everything he said about love. He held in a snort when the priest spoke of faithfulness. But when he invoked the gods to bless the couple with many children, Bastian couldn't help but glance at Tressa. She'd wanted a child so desperately, but was never able to conceive. Her expression didn't change. There was no indication the

priest's words had hurt. Maybe she'd moved past that. Bastian didn't feel he would know anymore.

They hadn't had a real conversation in months – not since she'd left him in the secret glade with their parents. Then Tressa's father had sent him back to Hutton's Bridge, effectively lying to him about where Tressa had gone. If he ever saw that man again, he'd beat him senseless. He was a liar and who knew what else.

A woman's high-pitched scream ripped through the crowd.

Bastian gripped Elinor's hand tighter and unsheathed his sword with his other hand. Then he let go and pushed her behind him. Unlike Tressa, Elinor wouldn't try to fight. They'd need her skills as a healer if things got dangerous.

"What's going on?" Jacinda demanded of her guards. They also had drawn their swords, surrounding her in a semi-circle. "You fools, I can defend myself. Go. Find out what's happening so we can get back to the ceremony." She turned to the priest. "Continue."

"Shouldn't we wait until they find out what's wrong?" Jarrett asked, his hand itching at his side.

Bastian was anxious to fight, too. He could understand Jarrett's need to investigate. He was about to suggest they go together, but then a screech ripped through the air.

He'd heard it before in the forest outside Hutton's Bridge, just before he and his people had fought the beasts.

"Kilrothgi," Jacinda whispered, her eyes narrowing. "How did they get here?" She stepped back from the group of them gathered, her eyes blazing. "How dare they set foot in the Sands?"

Jarrett dropped Tressa's hand and reached out for Jacinda. "Not now. You don't know how many there are. You may not be able to fight them alone."

Bastian admired Jarrett's care for his queen, but one glance at Tressa told him there was more he didn't know. She looked uncomfortable with Jarrett's attention to Jacinda.

Jacinda shrugged off Jarrett's hand. "I will meet you back in the throne room after we destroy this enemy. In the chaos, no one will see what I am about to do. This is my home. My throne. They will not infringe on my rule. I will show them who rules the Sands!"

Jacinda threw her arms to her sides. Lightning crackled, striking her hands. In the blink of an eye, Jacinda was gone, and a magnificent golden dragon with black wings stood before them. Bastian couldn't stop the shudder, the fear passing through him. These people, these dragons, whatever their natural form was, were perverse. He glanced around. No one was paying attention to where the dragon had come from. They were all too busy running for their lives.

Jacinda's massive clawed feet dug into the sand, as she pushed off

into the sky, her wings flapping so hard the air pushed Bastian and Elinor to the ground.

Chapter 31

"What is a kilrothgi?" Bastian yelled to Elinor. His eyes frantically searched the panicked crowd. He'd lost Tressa in the confusion. His sword still drawn, they ran through the masses of people, following in the golden dragon's shadow.

"It's a giant beast from the Hills of Flame. They are bred as killing machines, but there haven't been any loose since before the fog fell on Hutton's Bridge and stopped the war between the dragonlords. It's very, very bad they're making a reappearance." Elinor breathed hard, her boots clomping behind Bastian, her hand holding fast to his. "They have a unique talent. They can mock anyone's voice."

Bastian stopped in his tracks. Elinor bumped into him with a grunt.

"Why did you stop?" she asked.

"Tell me again. What you just said about the kilrothgi."

"They can mock voices, but usually only one word at a time. Usually a name. They use it to draw the victim into their trap."

Anger churned in Bastian's stomach. "I know these beasts. They were hiding in the fog outside Hutton's Bridge. I defeated an entire group of them."

Elinor's eyes grew large. "Kilrothgi in the fog? I never heard of this."

"They must have been trapped there with us, unable to escape. On the way out, I killed them with the help of my people. That was just before the Black Guard took me captive and dragged me to Ashoom."

"Then you know how dangerous they are," Elinor said. "We should run. Jacinda has her own army. There is nothing you can do to help them."

The crowd had scattered into the desert, looking for shelter from the beasts. Bastian and Elinor stood alone. Between them and the castle stood a phalanx of soldiers. Beyond the soldiers Bastian could see more kilrothgi than he could count. Taller than three men on each other's shoulders and covered in coarse brown hair from head to toe. Above them all flew Jacinda, fire streaming from her mouth and setting kilrothgi on fire. A second golden dragon joined her, but it did not slow the kilrothgi. As one beast fell, another would take its place, swinging and scraping with bloody claws, advancing in small increments, pushing the soldiers back.

Elinor tugged on Bastian's arm. "We need to run, now! If we don't, they'll cut through the soldiers. They'll kill us, too. Kilrothgi will not stop until they've sated their thirst for blood." Panic laced her words. "Please, Bastian."

He looked around once more. Still no sign of Tressa. She must have escaped with Jarrett. "Okay, we'll go find Connor."

"And then we'll leave?"

He knew the question wasn't as simple as it sounded. She wanted to know if Bastian would take time to hunt down Tressa. Whether they were going to save themselves or step in the path of danger to find the woman who'd rejected him over and over again.

"We will leave."

Elinor smiled. "Then let's go." She squeezed Bastian's hand.

"Unless Connor shows up in the sky above us, we'll need to skirt the battle to get back into the castle," Bastian said, sizing up their paths to escape. "We don't know enough about the desert to flee that direction. We could be running to our deaths."

Elinor looked up, bestowing that familiar gaze on him. "I trust you to get us back into the castle."

"Are you ready?" Bastian asked.

Elinor nodded.

"Then stay behind me. I'll protect you. And if I don't make it through, keep running." He laid a hand on her cheek. "Can you promise me you won't try to help me if something bad happens?"

Elinor pursed her lips. "I won't make any promises. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that."

He knew it was the best he'd get from her. "Then let's go." Bastian dropped Elinor's hand, trusting she'd remain behind him as she promised, and grabbed the hilt of his broadsword with both hands.

Sweat trickled down his forehead. It wasn't just the unabated heat. Nerves tingled in every part of his body. He kept reminding himself he'd survived kilrothgi once before and he could do it again. This time he didn't even need to kill them all. He only needed to get Elinor to safety in the castle.

With a howl, Bastian set off for the kilrothgi marauding through the garden, stomping the plants into the ground. He slashed and hacked his way through, not even stopping to look and see if Elinor was following.

The metallic scent of blood overtook the flowery perfume in the air. Claws bent on death slashed through the warm sandy breeze. Bastian pulled his shirt up over his mouth and nose, preferring to breathe in his own musk than the putrid animal scent of the kilrothgi.

He fought until his eyes blurred and his arms ached. His arms sailed through the air, landing blow after blow, gaining him only a

few steps with each whack. Still Bastian fought on, refusing to give up, believing they would make it out alive — until a scream echoed behind him.

One of the kilrothgi nabbed Elinor. She struggled in its grasp, her booted feet kicking and her arms flailing. "Let me go!"

Drool slipped from the side of the beast's mouth as it gnashed its teeth with a noise so grating it sent shivers down Bastian's spine. Blinded by the uncountable number of murderous kilrothgi, he pushed through them, stepping on their feet and swiping any who dared touch him with his sword.

Elinor's screams pierced the evening sky and Bastian followed them. Every time he looked up, all he saw were hairy arms and chests and legs, but not even a glimpse of Elinor. The only thing that kept him moving was her screams.

"Bastian!"

"Bastian!"

"Bastian!"

The kilrothgi's mocking outcries chorused around him, making him even more confused. If he couldn't follow Elinor based on her voice, then he'd lose her to the kilrothgi. He'd already lost his wife to one in the forest outside Hutton's Bridge. He wouldn't let it happen to Elinor.

Bastian sheathed his sword, grabbing the long brown hair of the kilrothgi next to him. He climbed hand over hand until he was on the beast's back. The beast swatted at him, but his other kilrothgi took no notice and continued to target the soldiers in Jacinda's army. He searched the sky for Jacinda, seeing she'd circled back and was readying for another pass. Whatever he did, he'd have to find Elinor fast or Jacinda would roast them both.

Bastian searched the mass chaos for Elinor's blond hair, hoping it would stand out among the dark brown beasts. A lock of her hair flopped over the shoulder of a nearby kilrothgi. Bastian grabbed hold of another beast's arm, swinging across their frenetically fighting bodies until he reached the kilrothgi who held Elinor.

"What are you doing?" she screamed. "If you went down, I was supposed to get to the castle and safety. Why didn't you do the same?"

Bastian grinned. "I don't believe for one second you would have left me here to die and I refuse to do that to you."

"This damn beast won't loosen his hold on me. You should go now." Her eyes flashed with anger, but her body, strong and fighting, told him she was glad he hadn't left her behind.

"On the count of three, be prepared to fall." Bastian climbed down the beast and leapt across to the one holding Elinor. "One," he yelled, hoping his voice had carried up to her. Bastian grabbed a handful of the kilrothgi's hair where its legs met. "Two!" With every ounce of

energy he had, Bastian twisted his hand, ripping the hair from the most tender part of its body. "Three!"

Elinor screamed as the beast let go of her. Bastian grabbed her arm before she could fall, and he leapt the rest of the way to the ground, shielding her from the impact with his body.

Elinor lay on top of Bastian, breathing heavily, while the kilrothgi bent over, clutching its hairy balls in its hands. "I think we'd better run," Elinor said.

Bastian didn't say a word. They leapt to their feet and ran to the castle, narrowly missing a kilrothgi paw.

Elinor laid a hand on his chest. "We're alive."

"Let's find Connor," Bastian said, his chest heaving with each word.

"No. This first." Elinor jumped into his arms and kissed him.

Chapter 32

Jarrett yanked on Tressa's hand, pulling her off the dais and away from danger. "Run!" he yelled.

She didn't hesitate, kicking up a cloud of sand in her wake. *Bastian will be okay*, she told herself. It was the same thing she'd thought when she left him in the forest glade with their parents and when she and Jarrett left Hutton's Bridge for the Sands. It was her mantra, and she knew it to be true. If anyone could handle himself in a battle it was Bastian.

"I don't normally run from a fight," Jarrett admitted to Tressa as they wove through the panicked crowd.

"I know," Tressa said. And she did. He always thought of her first.

Jarrett tugged on her hand again. "This way."

She gave one last glance to the others running in the opposite direction. She trusted Jarrett. He'd never given her a reason not to. They headed farther out into the desert, coming upon a swell of sand. Jarrett helped her to climb the dune. He brushed aside the sand, revealing a door underneath. "It's not a real dune. It's a bunker we built in case there was ever such an ambush. We can hide here until things blow over."

He tugged at the latch. The door groaned, opening slowly. Jarrett clapped his hands, releasing a small ball of light, not unlike the one he'd made when they were hiding in the alley with Henry in Ashoom. It was the night everything changed for Tressa. When she found out dragons were just as human as her. Well, at least some of the time they were.

She followed him in, and he closed the door behind them. "There isn't any water or food, so we can't stay long. Hopefully the fight will end soon. Jacinda's warriors are nothing like the Black Guard. These men have been trained rigorously for battle."

"And we weren't?" Tressa asked, amazed. She'd never worked so hard in her life, practicing from morning until night. She had only to think about it, and her muscles would start aching again.

Jarrett laughed, tossing his head back. "What we did in Ashoom was child's play. My men here could have defeated the Black Guard

with a tilt of the head and a swish of the sword. Even Marden, the man like a mountain, would have pissed his pants in the presence of my men."

"Wow," Tressa said, a smile on her face. All this time she thought she'd achieved something impressive only to find out others were far more powerful. She shouldn't have been surprised. After growing up in a village hidden from the rest of the world, her knowledge was miniscule.

Silence fell. Tressa wrung her hands, looking down at them. Remembering she was still in the see-through gown, she crossed her arms over her chest and crossed her legs.

"Seeing Bastian was a surprise." Jarrett said it in a monotone.

"Yes," Tressa said. Surprise was a mild way to put it.

Astounding. Shocking. Unforeseen.

No, surprise would have been saved for her reaction. Or lack thereof.

"As soon as my men defeat the kilrothgi, we'll look for him," Jarrett promised.

"And the woman he was with," Tressa added. She hadn't seen the blond before. The girl was pretty. She reminded Tressa of the woman back in Hutton's Bridge who'd bragged about her liaisons with Bastian. "We will find them both and see to their safety. For now, tell me more about the kilrothgi. What are they?"

Jarrett didn't ask more about Bastian, to Tressa's relief. He motioned toward a simple chair, so utilitarian and unlike anything she'd seen in the castle. She sank into it and closed her eyes. Yes, she preferred this to the finery.

"A long time ago in the Hills of Flame, the king –"

"King?" Tressa asked, interrupting. "I thought all the dragonlords were women."

Jarrett shook his head. "Not at all. A man rules the Meadowlands. A man also ruled the Hills of Flame when the Great War started."

"And the Charred Barrens?" Tressa was curious. Most children probably learned the history of the Dragonlands, but due to her isolation growing up hidden behind the fog in Hutton's Bridge, she knew so little.

Jarrett sighed, stroking his goatee. "The Charred Barrens is a mystery. The land is dead. No one has been seen or heard of from there since the fog fell on Hutton's Bridge."

"Strange," Tressa said.

"Indeed. But back to the Hills of Flame. It's always been clear they feel they have the right to rule all of the Dragonlands. To help them achieve their goals, they used dark magic to create evil creatures, the kilrothgi being one of their minor creations."

"Minor?" A shiver traveled down Tressa's spine. "What else do they have at their disposal?"

"I wish I knew," Jarrett said. "I've tried sending spies, but none ever return. I gave up two years ago. It was a waste of life and of good men. I also couldn't bear to see the widows left behind."

Tressa grinned. "You're a good man." She took a deep breath, changing the subject. "How did you end up in Jacinda's bed?"

Jarrett stood and paced, his arms behind his back.

"I'm sorry, that was unfair of me to ask." Silently Tressa scolded herself. What had she been thinking? His past relationships were none of her business.

"No, no, it's fine. I don't mind telling you." Jarrett sat on the ground at Tressa's feet. "Jacinda is a powerful woman. I was young, weak, and fascinated with her. Women in the Sands aren't known for their subtlety, but when the queen shows interest, a man would be a fool not to take notice." He shrugged his shoulders. "She seduced me one night. She made me captain of the guard not much later."

"That couldn't be easy for you."

Jarrett looked up at Tressa, his eyes wide and unblinking. "You know me well. You know the responsibility I feel."

"You weren't trying to keep the position for the power, you were trying to serve your realm." She wasn't guessing. By now she knew Jarrett's heart.

He laid his head on her knees. "It's true. And I did care for Jacinda. I wouldn't say I loved her, nor did I ever tell her I did. Not even in a misplaced word in a moment of passion. I think she hoped I would come around. She was lonely after her husband died. A mother raising two sons alone. I had great respect for her."

"You don't love her..." Tressa let the words trail off into the silent bunker.

"I have only ever loved one." He lifted his head. "And that is you."

"We haven't known each other long." It was a weak protest.

"And you have known Bastian your whole life. You have loved him. Yet you came with me instead of running to him. Does only the length of time you've known someone determine how much you can love them?"

Tressa thought carefully, wanting to choose the right words. She wasn't sure she knew the answer. Her lips parted and a screech rang out in the sky.

"That's not one of our dragons," Jarrett said, springing to his feet. "I know their calls." He flung the door open and looked out, then poked his head back in. "Tressa, it's the blue dragon. Bastian and the blond woman are riding it."

Tressa scurried out the door behind Jarrett. He was right. The blue

dragon flew above the Sands, casting a shadow across the bunker's door.

Jarrett jumped, waving his arms in the air. The dragon continued to fly toward the southeast. Then it banked slowly to the left, coming back toward Jarrett and Tressa. It coasted ever closer to the ground, kicking up a small sandstorm.

Tressa flung an arm over her face, squinting through the sandy air. The dragon landed not far away. Bastian slid off its back, holding a hand out to Tressa. He beckoned. *Come with me*, she could almost hear him say.

She looked at the grand beast who she believed was her best friend Connor and at the blond woman sitting expressionless on his back. Who was she to Bastian? Was she really just a healer or something more? She was pretty. Her face kind. The way she gazed at Bastian told Tressa the woman had feelings for him. It was easy to see.

Tressa waited for a pang in her heart. She waited for that jealousy to kick in. She waited for the memories of her time with Bastian to rush over her and send her running into his arms.

They didn't come.

Tressa stumbled backward, closer to Jarrett. Bastian would be safe and healthy without her. She knew that. If he'd survived everything he'd faced over the last few months, he could live with losing Tressa.

She looked Bastian straight in the eye and shook her head no.

He stood still for a few moments. His arm dropped to his side in resignation. Bastian climbed back on the dragon and dug his heels in. Without another glance, the three of them lifted into the air leaving Tressa and Jarrett standing alone in the sand.

The fighting in the distance was done. Tressa turned to Jarrett. "Perhaps it's time to head back to the castle?" She slipped his hand into his as they climbed the dune.

Kilrothgi lay dead on the dais where they'd almost been joined in marriage. Men in Jarrett's guard stood on top of the defeated beasts, waving their swords in the air.

Chapter 33

"Where were you?" Jacinda demanded when Jarrett and Tressa walked through the door to her throne room.

"I was protecting my bride from the kilrothgi," Jarrett said, his arm around Tressa's shoulder.

"You are the captain of my guard." Jacinda huffed, sinking into her throne. It sparkled, crusted with gems and fitted with a fine red silk over the golden frame. Her hands gripped the armrests. "You should be protecting me."

Jarrett rolled his eyes, keeping a tight grip on Tressa. "You can take care of yourself just fine."

"Then my people!" she yelled, slamming her fist on the chair. A sapphire broke off and tumbled to the floor.

Tressa remained silent. Jarrett swore he knew how to handle Jacinda's anger. He'd had years of experience taming her dragon.

"I am protecting Tressa, just as we should be protecting her people. Give me troops to find the residents of Hutton's Bridge. With the fog gone, no one is safe. Only one village holds the secret of the honey and that is Hutton's Bridge. Do you think the Red will sit by? No! That's why the kilrothgi attacked today." Jarrett stood firm. He'd let go of Tressa and crossed his arms over his chest. "You know as well as I do if the Red gets to the honey first, the war will be reignited. All of our lives will be in danger."

Jacinda sighed, the pinched wrinkles around her eyes relaxing. She rubbed her forehead. "I know. The world is regressing. We are going back to the time of our forebears."

"The fog is gone. War is upon us." Jarrett pointed at Tressa. "She can help us. She knows her people better than anyone. With Tressa on our side we can return peace to the Dragonlands."

"The Red will not back down so easily," Jacinda says. "They will not be afraid of one girl."

Tressa's hands tightened into fists. She lifted her chin and stepped into the argument. "No, but with your help, we can put fear into their eyes. I will lead them into battle. I am not afraid."

Jacinda laughed. "Silly girl. You should be sulking in the corner, upset about your wrecked wedding day."

"That is not why we came to you," Tressa said. She gritted her

teeth, remembering the harrowing ride to Risos in the dragon's claws and her imprisonment until Jarrett arrived. "You forced this wedding on us. Jarrett and I were fine the way we were. We only came to you for help because Jarrett thought you would care about the future of the Dragonlands."

"What can you do? You're just a girl, not a warrior." Jacinda eyed her, reminding Tressa of her see-through gown.

Tressa's first instinct was to cover her body, still exposed in the sheer gown. Instead she thrust her chest out proudly. "I am a woman. Younger than you. Stronger than you. I have ties to the honey. I know who tended to the bees. There is no one better suited than me to lead this search mission. Give me some of your troops. Let me win this war before it starts."

Jacinda's eyes narrowed. They swept over Tressa's midsection, then focused on her face. "If this is what you want, then I will offer you a small contingent of my men." She glared at Jarrett. "Get the honey and her townspeople, and get back here as soon as possible."

"You'll offer my people asylum?" Tressa asked, pushing the boundaries. She needed every assurance her people would be cared for or there was no point in pursuing help from Jacinda any longer.

"Yes, yes. Asylum. But I expect them to work and contribute. I won't be host to a permanent settlement of dullards."

Tressa fumed. "My people are not like that. They are survivors and they are hard workers. Everyone outside the fog assumed they were dead. Not only were we alive, but we flourished. If anyone can adapt to a new environment, it's the people of Hutton's Bridge."

Jacinda yawned. "Are you done with your little speech?" She waved a hand in the air. "Be gone. Both of you. It's been a tiring day."

"That it has." Jarrett placed a hand on Tressa's back. "Are you going to order us married again tomorrow, or do we have your leave to set out in the morning with the army?"

"You've proven to me that you're going to go through with a marriage to this girl whether I like it or not." Jacinda closed her eyes, but not before Tressa glimpsed the resignation in them.

So she'd won. She and Jarrett had proven to Jacinda that they truly loved each other. Tressa wasn't sure exactly how she felt about Jarrett yet, but she did know he was a special man. Attractive, caring, empathetic. She hadn't found a chink in his personality yet.

Jarrett bowed to his queen. "With your leave, we will retire to my rooms."

Jacinda either ignored him or missed the implication of his simple statement. But Tressa didn't. He wanted her to come back to his chambers instead of the ones where she'd been held prisoner in the last few days. Her heart skipped a beat. She took a deep breath to

calm herself. Of course he'd take her to his chambers. That was where her new wardrobe awaited her. The attendants had probably moved all of her things there during the first part of the ceremony – before the kilrothgi had taken them by surprise.

Jarrett slipped his hand over hers and lead her out of the throne room. No one stopped them. Tressa felt the invisible bonds that had chained her here fall away. Finally she had her freedom.

They walked in silence through the castle to Jarrett's chambers. He flung the doors open, revealing a sumptuous sitting room. Another door was set back in the room, presumably leading to his bedchamber. A fire roared in the fireplace, infusing the room with warmth in the dark of the night. Jarrett held his arms out wide. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful." Tressa's fingers ran along the silken couch. She'd never grow tired of the gentle fabric, so unlike the bulky wool of Hutton's Bridge. It screamed luxury and at the same time whispered sensuality.

"I know you stayed here only because of your loyalty to your people. I don't mistake your choice for anything else. I know it does not include me."

"Jarrett..." Tressa wrung her hands. How could she tell him that she couldn't stop thinking about him? That he'd broken through that armor she'd so carefully built? That she wasn't married to Bastian in her heart any longer, and hadn't been for a very long time? That she'd fallen into Bastian's arms out of habit? That if Jarrett made one more move, she wouldn't be able to resist him any longer?

He placed a hand on her cheek. "I'm sorry for everything you've had to endure here. I had hoped Jacinda would readily agree to help us. The wedding, well, it was brave of you to go through with it."

"We didn't actually get married," Tressa said, letting the heat from his hand warm her whole body. She closed her eyes and leaned in. "Jarrett?"

"Yes?" he asked, his voice a careful whisper.

"I —"

His lips fell on hers and his arms snaked around her back. They tumbled onto the couch, their arms a tangle, Tressa on top of Jarrett. She forgot to breathe, only taking in Jarrett, as if her heart couldn't manage one more beat without him.

Jarrett pulled back. "Are you sure?" His hand found its way back to her cheek, his thumb stroking her lips.

Tressa trembled. His shirt had fallen open and her hands rested on his bare chest. The stark paleness of her skin contrasted against the deep brown rippling across his abdomen. A shiver traveled from her heart to that warm spot between her legs.

"Yes."

All it took was that one word. Jarrett stood up, gathering Tressa into his arms. He kicked open the door to the bedchamber. She laughed. "Don't break anything."

Jarrett turned his dark eyes on her. "Trust me, I'm very gentle."

He laid her down on the soft blankets. Tressa had no doubts in his promise as he slowly removed her sheer gown, savoring every inch of her body with his lips.

Chapter 34

Tressa woke up, her head resting on Jarrett's chest.

"Morning," he said, smiling at her.

"Morning." She grinned and sat up, not at all ashamed of her nakedness as the sheet fell to her waist. She reached over to the table. An attendant had brought them breakfast, silently sneaking in when both Jarrett and Tressa slept. Tressa took a cup of tea, letting it snake down her throat. "Mmm. It's the same tea my Granna used to give me back in Hutton's Bridge. We'd take it every morning together. Everything feels so unreal this morning."

"It wasn't a dream." Jarrett wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer.

Tressa sipped the last of the tea, set the cup aside, and laughed. "If it was just a dream, then we wouldn't be forced to get out of bed and head out with an army this morning. We'd get to stay here and do more of all the wonderful things we did last night." She kissed his chest, savoring his smell, a heady combination of the desert and wine. "But we can't. We have to march out as soon as the sun is up."

"I know." Jarrett kissed her forehead. "If you changed your mind and told me you wanted to wait another day, you wouldn't be the same woman I've risked everything for. I'm ready whenever you are."

Regretfully Tressa stood and padded across the floor to the wardrobe. She hadn't even had a chance to look at her new clothes last night. As Adara had promised, the new leather outfits were in there. They looked and smelled more glorious than Tressa could have imagined. Her fingers grazed over the pant legs under the long tunic, barely feeling the outline of a dagger. She smiled. Adara had done just as she'd asked.

"What are these?" Jarrett asked, sliding his arms around her waist and nuzzling his lips into her neck. His hands slipped dangerously low, almost convincing Tressa to push him back into bed.

"Some new clothes Adara made for me. I can't wait to get them on. Aren't they beautiful?" Tressa pulled one out of the wardrobe and held it up in front of her.

Jarrett's hands had made their way north, cupping her breasts.

"Mmm, yes."

She slapped Jarrett. "You're not looking at the clothes."

"No, I'm not," he said. "Should I be?"

Tressa dropped the outfit on the floor and spun around, still wrapped in his arms. She stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his, letting her tongue meander.

Jarrett pulled her closer.

Tressa grunted, pushing him away. She wrapped her arms around her stomach. Falling to her knees, Tressa fought against the tears spilling from her eyes.

Jarrett squatted next to her. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Pain coursed through Tressa, unlike any she'd ever felt. A tearing sensation ripped through her lower stomach. Her muscles cramped and she crumbled to the floor.

Jarrett picked her up, cradling Tressa against his chest like a baby. He laid her down gently on the bed. "Stay here, I'm calling for the physic."

A warm liquid burst from between her legs, streaming down her thighs. "What?" Tressa reached down, her fingers touching the sticky substance. She looked at her fingertips, covered in blood and mucous.

"I don't understand," she whispered to no one.

The door burst open, Jarrett ran in, followed by a female healer. After only a quick glance the woman yelled, "Get me Lea and Darja."

She sat on the bed next to Tressa. "How far along were you?"

"I'm sorry?" Tressa asked. She looked up at Jarrett. "What's going on? What's wrong with me? Am I dying?"

The woman stroked Tressa's hair. Sympathy dripped from her eyes. "You've lost your baby."

Baby?

Tressa's eyes met Jarrett's. "What does she mean? I wasn't pregnant."

"Oh dear." The healer grabbed Jarrett's hand. "You didn't know?"

Jarrett's eyes wide, he shook his head. "No. We didn't." He sat on the bed next to Tressa. "Did you know?"

"No." It came out a strangled cry. "I didn't. I would have told you. I would have..." She trailed off. She didn't know what she would have done differently. The baby would have been Bastian's. He was the only man she'd been with since leaving Hutton's Bridge — up until the night before.

A baby. The only time she'd ever managed to get pregnant after all those years of trying.

Gone.

Lost.

And she didn't even know.

"We made love last night. Is this my fault? Was I too rough with her?" Jarrett pleaded with the healer. "Is this my fault?" Tears glistened in his eyes.

"No," the healer said. "That is quite unlikely. Miscarriage is common. You can try for another soon enough."

Tressa shook her head. Anguish spread through every part of her. It tingled in her fingers. Bit at her toes. Cramped in her stomach. Tressa leaned over the side of the bed and threw up.

A gaggle of attendants broke into the room carrying buckets of water and cloths. One knelt on the floor, cleaning up the mess Tressa had just made.

"It'll be okay," the healer said, stroking a wet cloth along Tressa's legs, cleaning up the remnants of the expelled life. "You will heal. You will conceive again." A pipe rested between her lips, a sweet smell wafting from the bowl.

"No." Tressa whispered. She said it over and over again. Her lips going dry with the effort. "No. I cannot."

"Tressa, my love." Jarrett sat next to the healer. He kissed the top of Tressa's head. "I am so sorry I couldn't protect you from this."

She looked up at the man she'd come to care for. Her heart ached. Was this her punishment for leaving Bastian, then? Was she to suffer for the rest of her life? Never to be a mother, when it was once the only thing she'd ever wanted? "Go."

"I'm not going anywhere." Jarrett stroked her hair and kissed her head again.

"You have to take the army and find them. I can't go...like this." She closed her eyes, refusing to look at the mess from the expelled remnants.

"No. I won't leave you." His voice cracked.

Tressa was touched he cared so much about a child that wasn't his. She'd never told him about her inability to conceive. There was never a reason. Now that he knew, maybe he'd leave her for another woman who could bear him children. Just like Bastian and the other boys had been forced to do.

"You must," she said finally. "No one else can save my people. Go. Please."

"Tressa – "

"If you love me as you say you do, you'll go." She measured even breaths, keeping herself on the brink of passing out.

"Listen to her," the healer said. "Go. Do as she says. There is nothing you can do for her now. She needs to rest."

Jarrett kissed Tressa on the head one more time. "This changes nothing. My feelings for you remain as they were, stronger even. I will come back to you and I will deliver your people, wherever they may

be. I swear this to you."

Tressa attempted a smile, then closed her eyes, lost in a deep sleep.

* * *

"IS IT DONE?" Jacinda asked. She eyed Tressa lying in Jarrett's bed. It was one she herself had spent many, many nights in. Now it belonged to this whore from the east.

"Yes, my queen. The tea did just as it should have. The baby has been ejected from the girl's body. Nothing remains." The healer chomped on her pipe, blowing smoke out the window, away from the girl.

"Good. Jarrett will be gone for days. It is more than enough time to dispose of the girl. Tell the attendants the story. That she recovered and decided to leave him. That she could not stand her sorrow at losing his child. That she ran away, after stealing a good portion of his gold, of course."

The healer laughed, coughing halfway through. Her lungs were likely as black as her heart. Loyal only to Jacinda, Miranda had served the queen since Jacinda was but a babe. "It will be done. The boat will be ready soon."

"Send her to sea." Jacinda admired her fingernails, sharp as a dragon's claw. "Let the darkness there swallow her."

"As you wish it, my queen."

Fire licked at Fenn's ankles, his skin melting into the bone. His screams echoed through the dungeon, only encouraging the horned demon to whip his back harder. Blood trailed down his arse, dripping in a river to the fire below.

Fenn smiled, his teeth sharp and dangerous.

"Harder!" He screamed at the demon. The hooved beast danced behind him, cracking the whip. "More! I need the pain!"

Fingers trailed a path across his shoulders and down his chest. "Are you enjoying this, my love?" Jayne's eyes narrowed, the red glow pulsing deep within her irises.

"It feels like being reborn. Eating through my mother's womb, slashing at her most delicate skin with my teeth." Fenn shuddered.

"I would be jealous of you talking of another woman that way if you hadn't just showed me exactly how you feel about me earlier today." Jayne's fingers trailed lower to his abdomen. She circled his bellybutton with one fingernail.

He'd left Hutton's Bridge all those years ago, leaving behind Tressa, just a baby at the time. He'd emerged from the fog and been turned into a dragon, but he hadn't regretted one moment of his life in servitude to the Red. His pain was their pleasure for months on end. On the day he broke, defeated and empty on the dungeon floor, his eyes closed and his soul about to leave his body, they turned him. They'd sent a woman to him and she'd served him a drink and then made love to him while he healed.

Every place her lips touched, the wounds healed. Closing up within mere moments, as if they'd never been inflicted on him in the first place. The pain of the healing was nearly as intense as the pain he'd experienced when the wounds were inflicted.

He didn't care. He loved every second of it.

He'd faced death, and with their help, he'd defeated it. Becoming a red dragon was beyond his wildest dreams.

And when he'd been on patrol outside the fog and found Jayne mostly dead, he'd brought her into the fold. Nearly killed her with his rage and then brought her back to life with his blood.

The others had recognized their bonds and allowed Fenn to turn her. Jayne made a wonderful soldier in their army. And when the two of them found Tressa and Bastian, they'd solidified their place in the ranks. They proved their loyalty by breaking the two of them up and sending Bastian back into the fog to die.

They were also the first in Hutton's Bridge after the fog fell.

Fenn signaled to the demon. It bowed and put away its whip. Fenn stepped out of the fire under his feet.

"Now that we have the rest of the people from Hutton's Bridge here, we should continue with the plan." Jayne handed Fenn his clothes. Though they preferred dragon form, their next assignment required them to use their human sides.

"Yes. The queen wishes us to speak with our fellow villagers from Hutton's Bridge." He pulled on a tattered shirt and pants whose ends were frayed off. No shoes.

Jayne mussed up his hair. Hers lay in a sloppy ponytail. "We have to show them we've been living a wonderful life. Make them trust us and want to confide in us."

"We can do that." Fenn laughed. "Our lives have never been better."

"But my brother," Jayne said with a sigh. "Adam is among them. He may notice a difference in me."

"Adam won't suspect a thing if you keep your wits about you." Fenn grabbed her shoulders, giving her a little shake. "Remember who you serve."

Jayne nodded.

"Remember what will happen to you if you fail." Fenn tilted her chin up and looked her in the eyes. His blue eyes flashed to red, reminding her what they were now.

"I won't fail." Jayne steeled herself, letting the dragon inside her roar. Only she could hear it, but that was all it took. Her forked tongue flicked out, licking Fenn's face.

"Not now, my dear," he said, letting her tongue wrap around his fingertip. He yanked, pulling her face to his. Holding the tension, he let his lips rest on her cheek. "We will destroy them before they know what hit them."

Jayne's tongue slithered back into her mouth. "Not until we extract the remainder of the secrets about the honey. We must find the beekeeper."

Chapter 36

Bastian lay in an unfamiliar bed, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't stop replaying the scene in his mind. Holding out a hand to Tressa. Watching her step away from him. Her eyes filled with regret and resolve.

They were done. Without so much as a word.

Fingertips trailed down his chest to his bellybutton. "Want to go for it again?"

Her voice grated on him, the woman he'd found in the dark and dragged to the nearest inn after dropping off Connor and Elinor at the castle. He'd spent half the night forgetting Tressa. His face buried in her hair, his lips on her breasts, and his hands on her ample bottom. She'd been a willing participant, but he didn't fool himself. The coin he'd left on the table was her only reason for being there.

It was fine with him. He'd needed release after waiting so long to be with Tressa again. He was done wasting his time on a woman who no longer wanted him. There was a new world outside of Hutton's Bridge, one he was happy to explore.

"Go." He slapped her bottom. "We're done here."

The woman, whose name he hadn't bothered to ask, and didn't really want to know, slid out from under the covers, shamelessly exposing her entire body. "Sure you don't want one more romp?"

"I can't afford any more from you." Bastian winked, exhausted.

She bit her lip. "For you, I might throw in a complimentary act of your choosing. I've never been with a redhead before. It's like you're made of fire."

Bastian laughed. There were no prostitutes in Hutton's Bridge, but he was under no illusions as to what this woman wanted. He could do with sex like that once in a while, but he didn't want to make a habit of paying prostitutes. He'd be broke before he'd be sated. "We're done tonight." He fished another gold coin he'd taken from Stacia's reserves from his pants pocket, and tossed it to her.

She caught it expertly in one hand. "If you need me again, you know where to find me." She shimmied a dress over her body.

Bastian had enjoyed himself thoroughly. She knew exactly how to

pleasure him. There was no hesitation. No concern anyone would be hurt.

She leaned over, leaving one last wet kiss on his manhood. Bastian had to hold himself back from yanking her down on him. No, he was done for now.

After she left, he pulled the curtains open, revealing a blinding sun. Bastian yanked on his pants, paid the man behind the bar for his room, and ventured out into the new day.

When they'd arrived back from the Sands the night before, everyone was exhausted. They'd gone their separate ways, promising to meet again at lunch and discuss their plans. They had secured the Blue throne, but they had to decide what to do next. Bastian wanted to find the people of Hutton's Bridge, particularly his daughter. It was time for her to have a secure life. He'd give up his position and give her a normal life. He'd gotten off course searching for Tressa. No more. All of his efforts would be focused on finding Farah and building a new home for them.

The castle gates were closed, barring him from entering. Bastian rattled the iron bars, bellowing orders at no one. After a few agonizing breaths, a man in a black robe slowly approached the gate.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his voice sonorous.

"I'm the ruler here. Bastian. Let me in." He hit the gates one more time.

The man's face remained hidden in the hood. "Our ruler is inside."

"What are you talking about?" He wanted to reach through the grates and throttle the healer. "I control the dragon. I am the ruler."

A low laugh emanated from the hood. "The dragon is under the control of Maester Malachi. He is the new leader of the Blue."

"What?" Bastian couldn't wrap his head around what he was saying. Bastian had set off in pursuit of a sexual conquest and Connor said he was going to check on the eggs and Fotia. "No, the dragon won't answer to Malachi."

Another chuckle.

If Bastian could reach him, he would have wrapped his hands around the man's throat.

"The dragon does as he's told when his offspring is in the hands of Maester Malachi."

"No!" Bastian shouted. Fotia and the other eggs were as much Connor's children as Farah was to Bastian. If threatened, Connor would do anything to protect them.

Anything.

Even give in to Malachi.

"Where is Elinor?" Bastian demanded.

"Elinor?" The healer sounded confused. He tapped his chin with

one long finger. "Ah, yes, Malachi's daughter. She is in her new chambers, sleeping peacefully. I suggest you stop your yelling before you wake her."

Bastian stumbled back. Malachi's daughter. No. She was only a simple healer, recently graduated into the upper ranks of her guild.

Was she a traitor? Had she been using him from the moment they'd happened upon Connor in the woods? No wonder she'd been so irritated at Bastian for wanting to fly to the Sands. The guards had taken it for love. Bastian knew now it only served to delay her plans to steal the throne from him. More importantly, she now controlled Connor, Fotia, and the eggs.

She was just another female, playing him like a lute. The idiot he was, he'd played along again. What good were his muscles if he trusted so easily, only to be fooled again?

Bastian spat at the man. "This town has done nothing but bring me trouble. You can have the stupid throne. I'm leaving."

He stalked down the street, seeing the men of the Black Guard ahead of him. The large one, Marden, stood with his beefy arms crossed over his chest. Bastian rolled his eyes. He didn't want to face these men. Not now. Not ever.

Bastian stepped to the side, staring at the toes of his boots. Maybe if he ignored him, they'd leave him alone. A strong hand clamping his shoulder told him otherwise.

"I don't want to fight," Bastian told Marden, not sure if the man would even care.

"Neither do I."

Bastian looked at him, surprised. He waited to hear what else the man had to say.

"The healers took over the throne late last night. It's one thing for us to leave our posts because you had a dragon behind you. It's another for a group of worthless healers to relieve us of duty. We respect the throne, and it shouldn't be under their control."

"What do you propose we do?" Bastian asked.

Before Bastian could react, two men grabbed his arms and a third hit him over the head. The world swirled away into darkness.

Chapter 37

Bastian sat on a hard wooden chair, his arms behind him, hands tied at the wrist. "This isn't necessary," he said for the fourth time.

Marden eyed him, his lips tight.

"Come on," Bastian implored. He had to get free and find his way back to Connor.

Not Elinor.

Maybe everything Elinor had done was all a set up to steal the throne. Once she found the dragon and figured out he and Bastian knew each other, she could have created the plan to take power. For all he knew she was sitting on the throne now, planning to be the new queen.

If he'd stop thinking with his cock, maybe he wouldn't be fooled again.

"Silence!" Marden signaled to another man. "Barden, if he talks again, shut him up."

Barden nodded, his braided beard bobbing up and down. "Yes, brother."

These men were brutes. Grunts. They didn't have a full brain between them. "I can get you the throne." Bastian said, taking the chance Barden wouldn't hurt him after a statement like that.

Holding a gloved hand in the air, Marden stopped his brother from hitting Bastian. "I'm listening."

"I don't want the throne. If we can win it back, you can have it," Bastian said.

"Go on." Marden turned a chair around, straddling it. The seat bowed under his immense weight.

"The dragon does as I say. If you help me break into the castle and secure it, the dragon will serve you. It will be grateful." At least Bastian hoped Connor would agree. If the healers had Fotia, he was sure his friend would agree to almost anything. Bastian knew he would if their places were reversed. Even now he was fighting to set Connor free so they could look for the people of Hutton's Bridge, one of whom was Bastian's own daughter, Farah.

"How do I know this isn't a trick?" Marden asked.

"Yeah," said Barden. "What if it's a trap?"

If Bastian's hand was free, he would have smacked his forehead. He knew people in his village looked at him as if he were lacking in brains, but these two were beyond stupid. Their muscles told him exactly how they'd won a place in the Black Guard. Maybe the next queen should have her men run through a gauntlet of intelligence tests as well.

"It's not a trap," Bastian said, holding back a sigh.

"If it's not a trap," Barden said, "we might be able to get whores for free again." His eyes lit up as he licked his lips.

"All the whores you want," Bastian said. His promise was empty and he felt bad for the women who had to suffer through a night with either of them, but he'd say anything to get free and on his way back to the castle, sword in hand.

Barden nudged Marden. "Did you hear that? Whores!"

"Quiet," Marden ordered his brother. His eyes narrowed. "If I gather my men together, you will fight with us to take back the throne?"

"Yes."

"And you won't betray us?" Marden asked. He tapped his chin with a beefy finger.

"I won't." Bastian tried not to fidget in the chair. Anything could be seen as a betrayal by these buffoons.

"All right, then. I will gather the rest of the guard and we will storm the castle before the sun sets." Marden stood and headed for the door.

"Wait," Bastian called out. "Untie me."

"Not yet," Marden said.

"But I promised to help you." Bastian struggled against the rope. A burning sensation rippled across his skin.

"These ropes hold you to your promise until the time comes to take back what is ours." Marden stalked out of the room, leaving Bastian alone with Barden.

Bastian bit his tongue. These men had walked away from Bastian when he claimed the throne. They hadn't cared enough to fight for it then. Why now?

"So Barden – "

"Don't talk to me." Barden clamped his hands over his ears and hummed a discordant tune. "I don't trust you," he shouted.

Bastian cleared his throat and coughed. Then he sniffled. Barden eyed him, his hands still over his ears.

"I'm thirsty," Bastian said.

"Can't hear you," Barden shouted. "You have to talk louder."

"If you would take your hands off your ears," Bastian mumbled, "you'd hear me just fine, you idiot."

"What?" Barden yelled again, coming closer.

"Thirsty!" Bastian screamed at him.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Barden dropped his hands and poured Bastian a cup of water. "Here." He extended his arm, holding the cup out to Bastian.

"I can't pick it up unless you untie me." Bastian reminded him.

Barden screwed up his face, his eyes squinted and his lips curled. "That's true."

"Marden didn't say I had to remain tied up." And he hadn't. Not in those exact words.

"No, he didn't." Barden set the cup down on a table and ambled behind Bastian.

A swoosh whispered in the air as Barden released a dagger from its sheath. Straining against the rope, Bastian made as much space as he could between his wrists. The rope went slack. Bastian shook his hands free, rubbing his wrists. "Thank you." He stood and grabbed the cup, downing the water in one gulp.

"You won't leave, right? We're in this together?" Barden's eyes widened, realizing what he'd just done.

Bastian couldn't imagine what Marden would do to his brother if Bastian escaped. Luckily for Barden, he had no intention of leaving. Without these men, he had no chance of getting back into the castle for Connor, Fotia, and the eggs.

"I'm not going anywhere." It was a promise he would keep.

They passed the time in a suspicious silence. Barden wouldn't answer him. Instead, he glowered at Bastian, as if his gaze alone could keep Bastian from bolting. Barden was a decent fighter, Bastian assumed since he'd won a place in the Black Guard, but Bastian knew he was smarter, and likely stronger. If it came to a fight, Bastian knew he'd win. Bastian didn't want to start anything, but if Barden did, he'd finish it quickly.

The door swung open. Marden strode in, followed by a few other men Bastian vaguely recognized. They'd ambushed him when the fog dissipated, knocked him silly, and dragged him to the castle on a pallet behind a horse that wouldn't stop shitting.

"Why is he free?" Marden demanded.

Barden uttered a few nonsensical answers, none of which were fully intelligible. Marden cuffed his brother, and then turned to Bastian. "You didn't leave."

"No, I didn't. I'm with you on this. I told you that before. Maybe you'll believe me now." Bastian crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'll believe it when the throne is secured." Marden nodded to the

other men. They drew their swords and pointed the tips at Bastian's chest.

He didn't flinch, even though every fiber of his being was telling him to run out the door. He had to trust them if he had any chance of freeing Connor. "When do I get a sword?" he asked, eyeing theirs.

Every blade was newly buffed and sharpened. He couldn't have done better himself. They might not have been the smartest men, but they knew how to keep their swords in fighting condition.

"Well?" He raised one eyebrow at Marden, who nodded at a dark haired man. One sword stood out. The double-edged blade was lightly stained with the blood of fallen enemies.

"Give it to him, Kelton."

Kelton flipped his sword around, handing it to Bastian, handle first. He gripped the hilt in his palm, relishing the feel of it. He'd created this very sword in his free time at the smithy in Hutton's Bridge, brought it with him when he stepped through the fog. Used it to kill the beasts hidden in the fog. They'd held onto the weapon all this time. It was a beautiful blade, far better than the one Elinor had stolen for him before leaving Ashoom.

It was his past, his present, and his future. Bastian's blood boiled, throbbing in his veins. "Are you ready to fight?" he asked the men.

Marden stood next to him, his hand on Bastian's shoulder. "We are." His hand snaked to Bastian's neck. "But if you betray us at any point, I will tear a hole in your chest and rip your innards out with my bare hands."

Bastian eyed Marden's free hand as it clenched and unclenched. He remembered the blow the man had dealt to his genitals not long ago.

He wouldn't betray Marden unless it helped free Connor, and then he'd run as fast as he could.

Chapter 38

Bastian followed Marden and the rest of the Black Guard

down a dark alley. Although the sun was still up, the tree cover above and the buildings built into the forest shaded their march toward the castle. Nine left from the Black Guard and Bastian. They weren't an army, but if they could displace the healers who'd taken control, Marden hoped some of the soldiers at the castle would defect to their side.

As far as Bastian was concerned all he needed was to get to Connor and the eggs. If they could free them, they wouldn't need anyone else's help. Everyone deferred to the one who controlled the dragon. Bastian had taken the throne without incident once before. Unfortunately this time someone had given them away.

Elinor.

It couldn't be anyone else. Only the three of them knew about the eggs. How else could the healers have known their vulnerable spot?

Marden stopped at the end of the alley and held up a hand. The men readied themselves, hands on swords, waiting for his signal.

The plan was to storm the castle from the front gates. The hope was that the healers would surrender without incident. Though Bastian knew some of the men were anxious to draw blood.

Marden held two fingers in the air, then cocked them forward. He rushed into the street, his sword aloft, glinting in the early morning sunlight. The men in front of Bastian grunted and bellowed. Bastian followed, his feet pounding, his heart racing. He'd seen a lot of battle lately, but this was the first time he'd be facing other men.

He reminded himself he wouldn't be killing a man for sport. It was to free his friend and the eggs. He wouldn't take a life unless it was necessary. There were many ways to fell a man without stopping his heart from beating.

The Black Guard didn't have the same standards.

When the healers at the gate didn't relent, Marden ran two of them through before they could even draw their swords. Blood gushed from their guts, splashing onto Marden's clothes. He didn't look down for even a moment. Instead he bent at the waist and rushed the gates, his

left arm cocked in front of him like a battering ram.

The gate cracked open. A loud metallic sound echoed through the street, calling to the people in their homes. Faces appeared in windows, curious, but not one door opened.

Bastian gripped his sword tighter. They were smart to stay inside. This wasn't their battle.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. The healers weren't even prepared and they should have been. Why take control of a castle without the means to defend it? The soldiers stood to the side, letting Marden and his men pass. They wouldn't take part in the slaughter, but they wouldn't stop it either.

Bastian wasn't sure what to make of any of these men, not the Black Guard, nor the regular soldiers. Did they have no loyalty to anything or anyone? Perhaps they only followed the mighty, even if it meant switching sides twice in one day.

He followed the Black Guard as they worked their way deeper into the castle. The healers in the black cloaks no longer opposed them. They stood with their backs against the wall. Some cowered on the floor, their fear palpable.

Still, Bastian kept his sword at the ready in case someone decided to be a hero. He didn't want to kill, but he wouldn't be caught off guard.

The doors to the throne room were shut but not barred. Marden kicked them open, striding in ahead of the rest of his men. Bastian held back in the hall. He didn't care to face whoever had holed up in there. All he wanted was his friend.

"Don't hurt me!" a familiar voice called from within the throne room. Elinor. Bastian would know her voice anywhere.

He sighed, shaking his head. The woman who'd betrayed him. She could stand in line behind Tressa. He was done trying to take care of them when clearly neither needed, nor wanted, him.

Bastian strode in. "Ignore her," he said. "She's the one who told the other healers how to trap my dragon."

The men of the Black Guard stood in a semicircle, the tips of their swords pointing toward the marble floor.

Bastian elbowed his way in front of them, curious what had them so stunned. What trick was Elinor playing on them now?

What he saw rocked his resolve. It erased his anger. Every drop of blood in his veins ran cold until he thought his skin would crack.

Elinor was naked, bound hand and foot to a table. Red marks slashed across her body, covered in dried blood. Bastian ran to her side. "Who did this to you?" He stroked her hair and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Bastian." It came out a whisper.

He stepped back, his sword raised. "Don't move," he told her, though her limbs were pulled so tight she probably couldn't. He brought his sword down on the first set of ropes, cutting her left arm free. "Help me!" He shot Marden an angry look.

The mountainous man lumbered over and hacked the ropes binding Elinor's feet free while Bastian severed the final rope holding her right arm. Bastian cradled Elinor's head and draped his cloak around her. "Don't move too fast."

She cracked a small smile. "I won't, don't worry. Who's the healer here?"

Bastian's heart felt heavy in his chest. Tressa's final abandonment had led him to a whorehouse instead of staying with his friends. "I thought you'd betrayed us," he said to Elinor.

Her eyes darkened a little. "I wouldn't do that. I thought you knew..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes rolled and she slackened in his arms.

"I'm sorry, Elinor," he whispered in her ear. "I am so, so sorry. Who did this?" Bastian whipped his head around the room, but there was no one other than the Black Guard.

"It doesn't matter. We have the throne back." Marden ran a hand over the arm of the throne.

Bastian laughed. "You think you're going to sit in it?"

"Perhaps," Marden said, "but I can guard it until an appropriate ruler tries to claim it." His eyebrows furrowed as he glared at Bastian. "That isn't you."

"I don't want it," Bastian said, assuring him. "I just want my friend."

"The dragon?" Marden asked. He signaled to his men, and one by one they filed into the hallway.

"Yes." Bastian looked down at Elinor. "Elinor too."

"I thought she sold you out." Marden snorted. "It's why the only women I allow my men are whores. Women can cloud your judgment. Make a man weak."

Bastian looked down at Elinor's golden locks, peppered with flecks of her own blood. His heart felt a familiar tug. Yes, women did influence him, but he refused to look at it as a weakness. In Hutton's Bridge, they'd been encouraged to see sex and marriage only as a means to keep their society trapped within the fog alive. He'd felt something taboo for Tressa, but not for any other woman.

He had to admit Elinor could spur similar feelings given the chance.

No, it wasn't weakness. It was his humanity.

"I have to find the dragon." Bastian lifted Elinor into his arms. She felt so small, so helpless, her head resting against his chest.

Marden shook his head. "The dragon is mine. You promised."

"I need to talk to him."

Marden's laughter bounced off the marble walls. "Talk to a dragon? Are you insane?"

Bastian had forgotten for a moment that Marden didn't know humans could turn into dragons. It was a well-kept secret in a land filled with magic.

"I have my ways of communicating with him. Don't forget, no one can take the throne without the dragon. You only have one half of the power, and it's not the half that matters."

"True." Marden nodded. "I will have my men guard the throne while you and I search for the dragon." He pointed at Elinor. "She stays here. I will have one of my men compel a healer to help her."

Bastian glanced down at Elinor. Now that he'd found her, he didn't want to leave her behind. The stairs to the caverns under the castle were too precarious to carry her with him. And there was nothing down there to help her. Only another possible fight with the people who'd taken control of the castle.

"I don't want Barden in charge," Bastian insisted before he would set Elinor down. The man was a fighter, but he was an idiot too. "Choose someone with more than half a brain." He knew Barden was Marden's brother, but he didn't care. It had to be said.

To his surprise, Marden cracked a smile. "Understood. Edgar will protect your woman. After we make sure the dragon knows he takes orders from me, you'll get her back."

"Agreed," Bastian said, shaking the man's massive paw.

Still, he wasn't so sure he was willing to hand Connor over either. He'd have to figure that out when the time came.

Chapter 39

Bastian led Marden and his men down the dank tunnels

leading to the underground haven few seemed to know about. With each day, the castle revealed its secrets to more and more people.

If Elinor hadn't told, could the other healers have been simply lucky, finding the hidden cache? Bastian doubted it. There had to be more he didn't know.

But all Bastian cared about was finding Connor and the eggs, freeing them. He was no longer the leader of the Blue. He wanted nothing to do with whatever machinations were in progress.

Bastian and Marden stepped into the cavern where Connor had hidden the eggs. Empty. Not even the stones on the ground showed evidence of the effort it must have taken to drag the eggs out. Bastian had tried to lift one back in the cave in the forest. It hadn't budged. Only Connor had been able to move them.

Perhaps he'd done it again, but under duress this time.

He'd do anything for those eggs. Bastian knew his friend's heart. Even if Connor didn't remember his own little boys, he treated those eggs as if they were his children.

"Where do we look now?" Bastian asked, hoping Marden knew the tunnels under the castle better than he did. "This is the only place I knew of."

Marden shrugged. "I wish I knew."

"Don't you know these tunnels?" Bastian asked, incredulous. The man was a member of the most elite security force in the Drowned Lands. He had to have some grasp of the tunnels in and out of the castle.

"I don't," Marden admitted. "We were told to keep out, upon sentence of death. So I did. I told all of my men to stay away, too."

A man behind them cleared his throat. It was the man Stacia had been having her way with when Bastian was brought before her, just before she died. "I've been here before. Stacia, she'd take me down here sometimes."

"This isn't Darren's first time in the Black Guard," Marden said to Bastian with a roll of his eyes. "How long have you known about these

tunnels?" he asked Darren.

A slight blush spread across Darren's face. "Stacia liked to escape down here sometimes and she'd take me with her. We'd had a relationship." His eyes wide, he looked around at his fellow guards. Most of them stood with arms crossed over their chests or eyes wide. Aland's jaw had dropped. "She said someday she'd marry me." Darren shook his head. "She was lying, wasn't she?"

Marden nodded. "It's okay. There isn't a moment where all of us haven't been distracted by a beautiful, willing woman."

The other men grunted in agreement. Bastian had to admit the same. A willing woman was hard to resist. Even though he'd hated Stacia and everything she stood for, he could understand how another man might be tempted by her beauty and power.

"Do you know of any other places down here that are large enough for a few dragon eggs and a dragon? Somewhere comfortable enough for the highest ranking healer to hide?" Marden asked Darren.

"Yes," he said. "There is a place where we'd go occasionally. I think it might have the space required to hold a few dragon eggs." He held up a hand. "But I'm warning you. Your eyes have never set on a place like this before. Don't be surprised. And," he paused, a lump bobbing in his throat, "don't judge me for it."

Marden pursed his lips together. "Lead on."

Darren led them down dark and narrow corridors. Bastian felt something run across the top of his boots. Remembering how Elinor had laughed at him earlier, he kept his disgust to himself. The rats wouldn't kill him. The men around him were another story. He didn't trust them. He was sure they didn't trust him.

He squinted his eyes, attempting to glean any solid form in front of him. They'd neglected to bring more than one torch, and being in the middle of the single file group of men, Bastian couldn't see much. Each man put a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him. It was the only way to assure no one would wander off in another direction.

They walked for what seemed an interminable amount of time. Bastian's legs were growing weary. Not just from the walking, but also from the night he'd spent with the whore. She'd kept him up in an effort to make more coin. He hadn't argued. Now he was paying for it with more than just the gold he'd taken from Stacia's stockpile of treasure.

The man in front of Bastian stopped abruptly. Bastian halted and so did the men behind him. So they'd made it to the secret room Darren had spoken of. Bastian's blood pulsed in his veins. His heart thumped a hard beat. Battle might lie ahead. He grasped the hilt of his sword with his free hand. In front of them, a door was flung open,

spilling light into the hallway. Someone was there. No one would be stupid enough to leave unattended torches burning. An erratic whistle swept through the air as swords were unsheathed. Bastian held tight to his, leaving it at his leg for the moment. He didn't want to accidentally injure someone in front of him. He could only hope the men behind him were as courteous.

"An egg!" Marden exclaimed. "And one man. Keep your blades ready, men." He guffawed. "Where there be a dragon egg, the dragon will not be far away."

One by one, they spilled into the room. The walls were drenched in a blood red ochre. Strange instruments of all kinds hung from the walls. Metallic cuffs. Maces with ends sharpened to a point. Feathers of all shapes and sizes drifted along another wall. Chains hung from the ceiling, swaying with the breeze the men had kicked up storming into the room. Marden turned around, taking everything in. "What is this place? A room of torture?"

"No," Bastian said. "What would the feathers be used for? Tickling the person to death? And there," he pointed over Darren's shoulder, "that looks like a bed."

Aland stood next to Darren and gaped at him. "What manner of room is this?"

"Yes," Marden said, "what exactly did you do here with Stacia?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Darren said, the blush returning to his face.

Bastian wasn't sure he wanted to know. He turned to the man hiding in the corner, his arms over his face. Bastian recognized him.

Connor. As a human. Naked. They'd found their dragon, but only Bastian knew. He'd need to tread carefully. Making his way over to his friend, who sat on a moth-eaten blanket on the floor, Bastian tried to catch his eye. Connor kept his head down.

He was asleep. Not dead. The slight rise and fall of his shoulders spoke the truth. Bastian crouched next to Connor. "It's me. We'll get out of this together."

"Is he injured, Bastian?" Marden called from across the room.

Bastian could have kissed him for the idea. He wasn't good at thinking fast on his feet, but he would take an opportunity when it was presented. "Yes, I believe so. He isn't responsive." He said it as much for Connor's benefit as Marden's. He hoped his friend would follow his lead. Connor was always the smart one. Even though he'd changed when he became a dragon, his instincts were still intact.

"There were plenty of guards on the outside, but no guards in the throne room with that girl. None down here. Just an injured man and an egg. Strange. What happened here?" Marden asked.

Connor's hands circled around Bastian's throat, yanking him

backward. His chin pushed upward, cutting off his breathing.

"I happened." Connor's voice dripped with venom.

Bastian fought against his friend, more for the benefit of the men of the Black Guard than actual attempt at escape. He wanted them to think Connor was trying to hurt him.

He knew his friend wouldn't.

Connor's arm flexed harder. Everything in the room swam in front of Bastian. The feathers on the wall spun in circles.

Bastian's head screamed at him to fight back, but he forced himself to fight only a little. Not to hurt Connor. To play along with what had to be part of the ruse.

"I will kill him if you come any closer," Connor said.

Bastian felt the cold steel of a knife against his throat. Blood dripped. His blood.

Connor had cut him with a knife he'd stolen from Bastian's hip. It was a superficial wound, but it was a warning.

Bastian was no longer sure where his friend's loyalties lay.

Chapter 40

Bastian thrust his elbow backward into Connor's chest. His friend grunted. His grip around Bastian's neck slackened. Bastian jumped to the side. Connor leaped to the other side, the knife in his hand.

"You'll all die. I will kill all of you." He waved the knife in the air.

Marden laughed. "What can you do against my men?"

"I can kill you the same as I killed the others." Connor stood still, his eyes narrow, his lips set in a straight line.

"You killed the healers who took control of the castle?" Aland asked. "If that's true, where are their bodies?"

Bastian had a sinking feeling he knew. "The dragon?" It was a question. One he already knew the answer to. Connor had exacted his revenge. In this form, Connor had only one focus: to protect his dragon children. Only one egg was here. The others were missing, which explained Connor's unbridled anger.

Connor's eyes were wild, unfocused. Anger pulsed behind his brown irises. It was a look born of revenge.

Bastian reached out, placing a hand on Connor's arm, trusting his friend wouldn't hurt him. Not again. "Where is Fotia?"

Connor glared at him. "Where were you? I needed you last night. We needed you."

"You two know each other?" Marden asked, curious. He tapped the side of his cheek with one beefy finger.

"I met him in the forest," Bastian said. "After I escaped the Blue. Right before I found the dragon." It was the truth, after all. He had found Connor first. "He helped me protect the dragon egg. He's a loyal man."

"He seems more loyal to the dragon than to you," Marden quipped. "He threatens us. I don't like that."

"Please, Connor, put the knife down. Marden and his men are here to help," Bastian begged his friend. He put pressure on Connor's arm, attempting to force him to lower his knife.

Connor resisted.

"Please, Connor," Bastian said. "Drop your knife."

"They'll take the egg." Connor's gaze switched to the egg against the wall. "Where are the others?" he screamed.

"We will help you find and protect the eggs if the dragon serves us." Marden held his sword at the ready. Bastian knew Marden could take Connor down quickly. The man was powerful and Connor was outnumbered. It wasn't a contest. Connor needed to choose life.

"The dragon will never serve you," Connor said. He spat on the floor. "The dragon detests men like you. No honor. You abandoned your post when your queen was defeated. You did nothing to protect the throne. Two different people have taken the throne since you walked out the doors. Now you want it back? If another one of the dragonlords attacks, will you walk out the door again? What makes you worthy?"

Bastian had wondered the same thing. He hadn't cared what the answer was. Clearly Connor did.

Marden fumed. "You are no one. You are not allowed to question me."

"And yet I did," Connor said. "Are you afraid to answer? Perhaps we can walk calmly back up to the throne room and discuss this like gentlemen. Leave a few of your men to guard the egg."

Then it occurred to Bastian. If Connor changed in this room, he would be trapped. The dragon was too big for the doorway. He wanted everyone out of the room so he could attack.

Bastian meant him no harm. He only wanted his friend back. Together they could find their children. He couldn't do it without Connor. He was only one man. But Connor no longer needed Bastian. The more his dragon side took over, the less he cared about his previous life.

"No," Bastian said. He held an arm between the two men. "Don't leave this room. When you do, you'll die."

Marden laughed again. "All this drama. Are we soldiers or actors dressing as women for a play? We won't die, Bastian. One man cannot kill us. All of you, with me. We will post a guard at the entrance."

Bastian wrestled with the truth. Tell it and expose his friend. Hold back and watch these men die in front of him, with only a small sliver of hope Connor would spare his life. One by one the men filed out of the room.

A grin spread across Connor's face, his teeth glinting in the firelight. Bastian glimpsed a hint of red lodged between two of Connor's teeth. Was it a piece of one of the healers who'd stolen the throne and the eggs, his flesh torn by the dragon inside Connor?

Bastian took a deep breath, making his choice.

Connor followed the last two men out of the room. Both of them flanked the doorway, hands on the hilt of their swords, ready to fight

an intruder. "Coming?" Connor asked Bastian.

Bastian ran a hand along the top of the egg. His fingers brushed over the ridges and valley until a crack in the egg surprised him. He tapped his fingers three times gently on the shell. Satisfied he'd found what he'd been searching for, Bastian nodded. "Of course, my friend. I'm coming."

"After you." Connor swept out a hand.

Bastian nodded. He clamped a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him. Connor's rested lightly on his. Bastian took a deep breath, his shoulders moving up and relaxing back down again. Connor's hand curled, his nails digging into Bastian's shoulders.

It was a warning. Or a promise. Bastian wasn't sure. He wanted to believe they were in this together. He wanted to know that his friend was still in there, fighting to control the dark side that was slowly overtaking him.

Down the hall they walked, steady, even steps. They arrived in the cavern and Marden took an immediate turn toward the stairway leading up to the castle proper. Connor's hand left Bastian's shoulder.

"Run!" Bastian yelled. "Get up the stairs as fast as you can!"

"Why?" Marden whipped his head from side to side, looking over his shoulder.

"Run for your lives!" Bastian's voice rasped as he screamed. He didn't dare glance behind him to see if his gamble paid off. He backed away, hiding in one of the niches in the back while the rest of the men scrambled up the stairs as fast as they could.

A roar echoed in the chamber.

A wave of heat rushed over Bastian as he cowered in the corner of a stall. Connor had unleashed his fire on the men. Bastian could only hope they'd gotten far enough up the stairs. Perhaps only their backsides were a bit singed. He'd saved their lives.

But only one thing could save his own.

Chapter 41

The dragon scabbled around the dirt floor, screaming out in anger. Connor slammed his head into a wall near Bastian. Hard plaster shattered, raining sharp particles down on Bastian's hair. He shook his head and ran out of the stall to stand in front of Connor.

He dropped his sword at his feet and raised his hands, all the while, chanting the same thing over and over in his head.

Save me. Save me.

Bastian gazed into the dark corridor behind Connor, but saw nothing. He waited, his heart thumping, as the dragon's lips parted in a smile identical to the one Connor had given him in the back room.

The dragon's head tilted until his eye was looking at Bastian straight on. The brown surrounding the black slit pulsed with a menace and a hatred unlike any Bastian had ever seen from his friend. His friend. He had to remind himself, his friend was buried in there somewhere. A man who cared. Who would never hurt his best friend.

But when he was a dragon, Connor the man fell to the wayside while his animal instincts took over. After seeing his eggs kidnapped, he'd snapped. He'd given in. Only one thing could pull him out of it. Bastian hoped his gamble would pay off.

A light mewling echoed through the cavern. Bastian smiled and the dragon took pause. He looked over his shoulder, and saw Bastian's savior.

Fotia toddled across the chamber, slipping on the loose rocks covering the ground. Her claws dug in, looking for purchase as her legs splayed sideways. Her stomach hit the ground with a little thud.

The cobalt dragon gave Bastian one last glance, then craned his neck toward Fotia. Nudging her up with his snout, the dragon helped her stand.

Bastian clapped his hands. "Fotia! Hey there, sweet thing."

Fotia's head perked up. Her tongue lolled out the side of her mouth. She ran, coasting over the pebbles, to Bastian. He held out his arms to the little dragon he'd grown so fond of. She nuzzled her snout into Bastian's stomach.

A loud puff reminded Bastian why he'd sought Fotia out. Why he'd

guessed she was hiding in the egg. The broken shell was a stroke of genius. She could hide in plain sight, in a place Connor could watch her. It was the perfect hiding spot.

The dragon was glaring at Bastian, his claws itching to tear Bastian apart.

"Come back, Connor," Bastian pleaded. "I'm not here to hurt you. You know that. Change back to a human. Let's talk. Please." He ran a hand down Fotia's back while she snuggled into him.

The dragon slithered across the ground, his head moving side to side. Like the predator he was, the dragon didn't take his eyes off his prey. He also didn't attack. Not with Fotia so close.

He wouldn't risk hurting her.

And Fotia was the only link Bastian had to Connor's humanity.

"Take a deep breath," he urged the dragon. "Just don't blow out a wave of fire. I'm your best friend. You don't want to hurt me and deep down you know it."

The dragon came closer. Every breath felt like an eternity. Bastian made a stand between life and death and the decision was no longer his. Connor could choose to swat Fotia out of the way. He could do away with Bastian. And if that was what he chose, Bastian would let Fotia go. He refused to put her in danger to save his own life.

He had a daughter. Even though he wasn't the best father in the world, he loved her. He would never hurt another man's child.

The dragon curled up, Connor's tail wrapping around his body. His eyes closed. Muscles shuddered. The agonizing change began.

Scaled cobalt legs transformed into pale legs covered in a swath of fine hair. Forearms dissolved, reshaping into Connor's muscular arms. Soon he resembled the man Bastian had known his whole life.

Connor was naked and helpless. His head hung down, the anger gone.

Bastian reached a hand to him, "Let me help you."

Connor's hand shook as they locked palms. His lips parted and he mumbled something Bastian couldn't understand. Not afraid of his friend, Bastian leaned in closer, settled his ear near Connor's mouth. "Say it again."

"Where were you? They took the eggs. They killed Elinor. They trapped me down here," Connor rasped. "I killed as many of them as I could to save the eggs. But their leader got away with them. He took them using magic." A tear slipped down his cheek. "Fotia is the only one left because she was hiding beneath the bed in that room."

Bastian pulled his friend into an embrace. Connor's head lolled onto Bastian's shoulder, the weight of his body pushing Bastian backward. He planted his feet and bent his knees, bracing against his friend. He would support Connor until he could support himself.

"I'm sorry." Bastian knew the words were thin. There was nothing he could do to erase what had happened while he'd been drowning his own sorrows between the breasts of a whore. "Elinor isn't dead, though. She's very much alive."

Connor lifted his head, his eyes regaining a bit of their brightness. "Truly?"

"Yes. She's being protected by a couple of the guards." Bastian glanced up the dark stairwell. "Did you hurt any of them?"

Connor shook his head. "No, I don't think so. They were too fast. Someone distracted them." He cracked a small smile. "I was only trying to protect Fotia. After last night, I didn't know who to trust."

"If I could go back —"

"You can't. We can only move forward." Connor straightened up, finally regaining his strength. He squatted down, opening his arms to Fotia. She ran into them. Connor sighed. "I cannot lose them, but I have no idea where they've gone. You, Elinor, and I need to leave." Connor stood. "Then we have to search for my children."

Bastian raised an eyebrow. "Your children are here." He took the cautious path, not wanting to put words in Connor's mouth.

"No. My other children. From before." His arms flailed around at the surroundings. "From the time that isn't so clear in my mind. If what you say is true, if I have two sons out there somewhere and they're in danger, I need to protect them too. The eggs have been taken from me. We have no idea where to start in locating them. While we search for traces of my human children, we will also search for the eggs."

Bastian wanted to jump and pump his fist in the air, but he held back. Finally. Connor understood. He might not remember his family, but he knew why it was so important to look for their people.

"What do we do about them?" Bastian pointed up at the ceiling of the cavern. "They want the throne back and the dragon's approval."

"I feel like flying into the throne room and dumping a pile of dragon shit on them," Connor said. "They almost got themselves killed down here. It's a good thing you were smart enough to know what I was going to do."

Bastian clapped his friend on the shoulder. "You really need to learn to control that fiery new side of yours. It's a little intense."

"I know." Connor danced around the room with Fotia, naked as the day he was born and just as oblivious. "It's hard to keep a level head. If you hadn't done what you did...alerting Fotia...I don't know if you'd be standing here right now."

"Fotia means more to you now than anything. I'm sorry I used her." Bastian sat down and tossed a rock from hand to hand.

The little turquoise dragon pranced over to him. Bastian threw the

rock. She scrambled to pick it up with her mouth, then brought it back, dropping it at his feet.

"I understand why you did it. Even in my dragon form, I had some inkling that you were trying to protect us." Connor sat next to him. Fotia lay on the ground, her head on Connor's knees.

"Will she be able to change to human form?" Bastian asked Connor. He looked at Fotia. His instincts told him to treat her like a small animal, but if there was the possibility that someday she'd be a little girl, twirling in a pretty dress, he didn't want to think she was nothing more than a puppy.

Connor shrugged. "I don't know. If there are other dragons, maybe they can tell us how this works. Maybe they can help me remember everything I've forgotten. So we head for...where?"

"I don't know," Bastian admitted. "We need to find a map. Ask Elinor where they might have gone."

"How is she? I thought she was dead." Connor took a deep breath. "When we got back last night, the healers cornered the two of us. At first, I wasn't concerned. Elinor seemed to trust them. Then they separated us." His shoulders drooped. "I heard her screams. I thought she'd died."

Bastian shook his head. "She's alive. Barely, but she is alive. She will need time to heal. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Connor said. "I'll meet you in the throne room."

Bastian stretched his legs before heading to the stairs. "We can do this, you know."

"I'm glad you think so, my friend. I'll be the first to admit I'm scared shitless. There's so much at stake."

Bastian wanted to respond. To give words of comfort. He'd never been able to express himself at times like this. Instead, he did what always came naturally. Taking the stone steps three at a time, he bounded up to the throne room. Ready to face whatever lay ahead.

Bastian threw open the doors to the throne room. He searched the room for Elinor.

"Where is she?" he asked, breezing past Barden just inside the entry.

Barden ran behind him, his boots tapping out an uneven beat as he struggled to keep up. Elinor wasn't anywhere to be seen. Neither was the table she'd been stretched out on. The floor was cleaned of all the blood. Bastian spun around, grabbing Barden's shirt. "Where is she?"

"She's resting," he stammered. "Aland got one of the healers to fix her up. Then they cleaned the place. A couple of them swore up and down they had nothing to do with the coup or the torture. That they'd been too afraid to stand up to their master."

Bastian let go of Barden and rolled his eyes. When he'd first set foot in Ashoom he'd been amazed and humbled by the power displayed. So different than the simple life in Hutton's Bridge. Many of them turned out to be weak fools. Followers. Even their leaders couldn't maintain power.

Bastian ventured a glance at the throne. He'd been uneasy sitting there. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. "Take me to Elinor. Then find Marden and tell him we need to talk."

He had assumed Marden and his men would be in the throne room. Maybe they thought Bastian died down in the tunnels. By the look on Barden's face, he wouldn't be surprised.

Barden waved at one of the healers. The thin man in the black robe scurried over to them. "He needs to see the girl. Take him," Barden said. The cloaked man dipped his chin and turned toward the doors. Even though Barden didn't intimidate Bastian, it appeared he did hold sway over the others.

Bastian followed the man out of the room and through the labyrinth of hallways. Despite spending time in the castle, Bastian still hadn't delved very deep into it. He had no idea how many rooms lay hidden within the castle.

The cloaked man came to a halt outside a set of doors. He knocked once. Another knock answered him and the door slowly creaked open.

Bastian pushed further, ignoring the grunt from behind the door. Not his problem if someone was stupid enough to stand there.

Elinor looked up from a bed across the room, her face clear of any blemishes. Bastian ran a hand over her face. "You're healed." His thumb lingered on her lower lip.

"I am. The gift I gave you was given to me." She swept away from him, her fresh black gown trailing behind her. Elinor laid a hand on an old man sitting in a nearby chair. "This is Malin. He has given me his moon. For that, I am grateful."

"Thank you," Bastian said, inclining his head in the man's direction. "Your gift won't go to waste."

The old man held up a wrinkled, shaky hand. "It is the least I can do to repair the damage Malachi brought upon our order. He fooled us all. And you, his daughter."

Elinor leaned over, bestowing a kiss on the old man's cheek. "My father will pay. I will see to it. He has overstepped his bounds. Your sacrifice will not go unappreciated." She swept her long blond curls to the side and squared her shoulders. "Bastian, we need to act now. We must find your people. If someone, or something, has taken them and plans to use them to hurt the other kingdoms, we must act."

"Malachi took the eggs. Connor and Fotia are safe, but we cannot let him have the eggs," Malin said.

"He won't hurt them." Elinor sighed. "He knows how valuable they are. Until they hatch and come of age, he will not be able to manipulate them. Besides, we have no clues as to where he could have taken them. At least with your people there may be a trail we can follow."

Bastian felt terrible for the little dragons. When they hatched, that scraggly bearded man was the first face they would see. As a father, he couldn't stomach the thought. Yet, his own daughter was still missing. Out there and, hopefully, very much alive. The eggs were still incubating. There was time. "Connor has also agreed to look for the people of Hutton's Bridge. I had hoped you would join us too. If you're feeling well enough."

Elinor held up her index finger. "Just one condition."

"Name it," Bastian said, willing to give her anything she asked. He owed her that and more.

"You will not leave us at any point. We are a team, and we will stick together. If you have to drown your sorrows over a lost love, stay here. It is your choice. You have to make it now." She folded her arms across her chest. "I can handle myself, but not against an ambush. I need you by my side. Not as my protector, as my partner. Connor needs you, too."

Bastian's chest ached. He'd let them both down. He didn't expect to

be forgiven immediately. He sucked in his gut and stood up straighter. "I swear to you, I will not let you down again."

Elinor's furrowed eyebrows relaxed. Her straight mouth curved into the bow he'd become so familiar with. She ran to Bastian and jumped into his arms, burrowing her head into his chest. "I know you will."

"I'm so sorry for what they did to you while I was..." He didn't finish. He didn't want to say it, and he was sure she didn't want to hear it. She was smart. He was sure she knew exactly what he'd been doing.

Elinor's hand rested on his forearm. She looked up at him. "I am a healer. I knew I wouldn't die at the hands of the men under my father's control."

"Then how did they find the eggs?" Bastian asked. "If you didn't tell them, who did?"

Elinor's face fell. "It was Fotia. She'd come up from the dungeon looking for Connor. When they saw her, you should have seen their faces. They'd come looking for the cobalt dragon, for Connor, and they found a juvenile dragon. They quickly forgot me and followed her back underground, dragging Connor with them." Elinor shook her head. "I don't know how they found the eggs. I passed out not long after they left me. The pain was too much to bear. It wasn't until you and those other men came back that I realized I wasn't dead."

Bastian's chest rose with a deep breath. "All of this chaos. For what? For a throne?" He wanted to ask her if there was any truth to Maester Malachi being her father. Maybe later.

"No. There is more. There must be more we don't know," Elinor said.

"There is," Malin said from his chair.

Bastian looked at the man, forgetting he was there. When Elinor talked to him, it was easy to ignore everyone else.

"Do you know something?" Bastian approached the old man slowly.

Malin slumped over in his chair. His hands shook. "I gave her my moon. Likely my last. I may not make it through another." His phlegmy cough echoed in the small chamber. "There are secrets that healers take to the grave. I do not know if Maester Malachi told his acolytes the secret."

"What secret?" Elinor sank to the man's feet. She took his liver-spotted hands in her lily-white palms. "I am just an initiate, but I promise to hold true to my vows."

Malin looked up at Bastian. "I can only tell her. I cannot tell you. Nor will she be allowed to tell you. If she chooses to break her vows, she will lose much."

Bastian glanced at Elinor and she nodded in response. "I'll meet

you in the throne room soon?"

"Yes." It was a simple answer, but it held great promise.

They were a team again. He and Elinor. And Connor. They were all too vulnerable alone, but together they could achieve anything. Before he could even close the doors behind him, the whispers began. Malin's voice cracked. Elinor gasped.

Bastian fought the urge to run back in and demand to hear the secret himself. His hands curled into fists. He had to trust Elinor. If the secret made a difference to their quest, she would do her best to help them. He had to believe in her.

He had to start to trust again.

Chapter 43

Steady rocking woke Tressa. She rubbed her eyes, confused.

Her mind felt mushy. Blurry. Unfocused. A strange smell of salt and rot assaulted her nose. Her eyes watered.

Tressa reached out with an unsteady arm, her fingertips drifting across rough wood.

"Where am I?"

She sat up. Her stomach lurched as the surface under her rocked back and forth. She grabbed onto ledges on either side of her, her eyes growing wide with horror as she realized where she was.

Adrift in a small boat, just big enough to hold her prone body. Tressa swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Water lapped against the side of the boat, licking her fingertips with salty tongues.

The sea stretched out in every direction, an unending flow of crests and wakes. Land was nowhere to be seen in the darkness.

Tressa sat frozen in fear. She'd never been around more than a harmless bucket of water or small stream. She didn't know how to swim.

Water was death for her.

She silently cursed Jacinda. She'd known the woman couldn't wait to be rid of her, but sticking her in a boat and pushing her into the sea while she was recovering from a miscarriage was beyond cruel. Jarrett claimed the dragon within Jacinda was strong. Where did her human will end and the dragon's wrath take over?

Tressa searched the tiny vessel for an oar. She came up empty. There was nothing in the wooden boat except herself.

Adara's leather clothes hugged Tressa's body, covering it as if it were a second skin. A few areas over her chest and legs were hugged even tighter by embedded armor. Tressa smiled. Those were the only clothes she had. The ones she'd worn to the Sands had been disposed of. She slipped a hand down her top, her fingertips touching steel. The small weapons were still there. When they'd dressed her, they must not have noticed the hidden pockets Tressa had asked Adara for.

She thanked every god she'd ever heard of. At least she wasn't completely helpless. If she could figure out a way to get to land, she'd

have a fighting chance.

The waves continued to carry her, toward what she didn't know. The stars shone, reminding her of the night she'd spent in the silken tent with Jarrett in the middle of the desert. Before the yellow dragon had abducted her off her camel. Before she chose Jarrett over Bastian. Before she'd lost the child she didn't even know she was carrying.

She wished on the brightest star. "Take me to land. Please. That is all I ask. Any land."

Breathing in. Breathing out. There was nothing else she could do. Her eyes closed against the endless expanse of water and sky. She reached inside herself searching for the strength she kept buried there. It had served her in the foggy forest. It had served her when she fought for a place in the Black Guard. It had served her when a dragon clutched her in its talons and carried her across the searing desert. It had served her when she'd wordlessly severed her connection to Bastian after the kilrothgi invasion.

But her strength had retreated, hiding amongst the white caps of the water. Instead she felt a great absence. It wasn't hard to figure out what was missing.

Her child. The baby she didn't even know she was pregnant with. Though deep down she thought she had known. Somehow she knew she already loved that baby.

Her thoughts drifted to her time in Hutton's Bridge and her morning tea with Granna. It was the same tea she'd drunk just before her miscarriage.

A dull ache spread across her chest. She'd never conceived. All those times with Bastian and the other boys whose ribbons she'd pulled. Not one pregnancy. And not one morning without the tea.

Anger built until she was on the edge of bursting. She'd confided in her Granna. Cried with her over every monthly blood. She'd thought there was something wrong with her, but now she suspected another explanation.

Her beloved Granna had kept her from pregnancy and so had someone back at Risos. It wasn't her body that had betrayed her. Others had done this.

Her limbs shook with fury at everyone who'd manipulated her. At the same time, they quivered in anticipation. She could get pregnant again. She wasn't barren. Hope burned brighter than her bitter anger.

She would never forgive them for what they'd done to her. Never. There would be no more caring thoughts of Granna. All of her good memories were obliterated with this revelation. As for Jacinda, that horrible queen who'd done nothing but hate Tressa simply because Jarrett loved her, if Tressa ever saw her again, she'd need ten men to hold Tressa back from killing her.

Her eyes snapped open. Tressa sighed and carefully inched her bottom across the boat's floor until she was lying down. She rested her hands on her lower abdomen.

"Even though I didn't know about you, I still love you." Her whisper carried in the silent air. "I wanted you for so long. I would have done anything to protect you. If only I would have known, I might have made different choices."

Tressa's thoughts drifted back to Jarrett. His lips on her stomach. His hands touching the most intimate parts of her body. Even in the boat, trying not to move, she couldn't tamp down the chills that always accompanied thoughts of him.

Part of her cursed her choice. She'd been carrying Bastian's child while she made love to Jarrett. If she had known, would she have gone with Bastian?

She was relieved it was a choice she didn't have to make. Her feelings for Jarrett were too strong. Yet if she'd gone with Bastian, her baby might still be alive.

Tressa lay still, her breaths measured and even. She didn't sleep. The moon bathed Tressa in light. She leaned over the edge of the boat, submerging her hand in the freezing water. She grunted, paddling through the waves to no avail. Her leather sleeve soaked, she pulled her arm back in the boat.

"How do I get to land without an oar?"

The waves continued to lap against the side of the boat, lifting her up and down, but not moving the boat very far.

"The waves go toward shore." She sighed. "I think."

"You could have told me more about the world," she shouted into the sky, angry with herself for not listening better when Granna told her stories. She never thought she'd need them. She never thought she'd survive the fog. "Why didn't you make me pay attention?"

Again she waited for a response that would never come. Besides, she had no desire to hear from the woman who'd deprived her of pregnancy for so many years.

"Better that I figure this out myself." She looked at the waves. "They're going somewhere. And I think they generally flow toward land. I remember something about a tide going in and out. So the water is traveling toward land."

She glanced over the prow of the boat. "Now how do I turn you so you're facing the other direction?" A gargoyle carved into the prow stared at her with dead eyes, its leering smile and sharp teeth mocking her.

"If I paddle at one end of the boat, maybe it'll turn." Tressa scooted forward, sticking her hands in the water again next to the pointed prow. She paddled hard. The boat tilted quickly to the side. Tressa lost

her balance, yanked her arms back into the boat, and grabbed the sides, quickly steadying it.

Her breath came in rapid spurts, her heart screaming at her to be more careful. "I can do this," she said. "If I don't, I'll sit here for who knows how long waiting for another boat to find me. In the meantime," she continued to mutter under breath, "I'll starve to death. All they'll find is a pile of bones."

She reached carefully toward the prow, her cheek resting against the gargoyle. Gently she paddled in the water, while carefully balancing her weight in the boat. Slowly the boat started to turn. Tressa held in the whoops of excitement.

"Not there yet," she said to the gargoyle. "Soon, though. We'll be headed to shore."

She gritted her teeth as the boat teetered on top of a wave. Muttering a few random prayers under her breath, Tressa wrapped her arms around the body of the gargoyle. The boat righted and settled onto the waves.

It pulsed toward shore, rising and falling on higher swells. Tressa's stomach protested, gurgling loudly. "No. I'm not going to throw up. I can do this."

She pursed her lips together, but with the next swell raising her higher, she couldn't keep it in. Closing her eyes, Tressa aimed for the side of the boat, hoping the vomit spewing from her lips didn't land in the boat. She was too afraid to grip the side for fear the boat would tip again.

Once her stomach emptied itself, Tressa relaxed. She opened her eyes as she rose on the next swell.

"Yes!" she yelled, pumping her fist in the air. Land appeared in the distance, green and lush with only the smallest bit of sand ringing the edge. The boat dropped and rose, over and over again. Each time land seemed to be coming closer.

"I'm not going to die out here." Tressa stuck out her tongue between dry lips at the gargoyle. "If Jacinda paid you to keep an eye on me, you can tell her that no matter what she throws at me, I will overcome it."

The gargoyle's unblinking eyes stayed focused on hers. Tressa gave him a little slap. "If you were real and a spy for Jacinda, I'd run you through as soon as I had a sword in my hand." Months ago, even thinking an inanimate object could hold magical power would have made her laugh and roll her eyes. Now she wasn't so sure. Anything was possible.

The boat rode the waves as shore came closer. Tressa held on to the sides, determine to stay as dry as she could. She rode the swells until the boat became mired in the sand. Tressa leapt to standing, her

boots splashing water all around her legs.

She stumbled toward shore as the rays of morning washed over the beach. She was out of the boat, safe from the water. But now all she could see was an expanse of high green grasses. She needed food and water.

Mostly she needed a sword. A very sharp one.

Chapter 44

Tressa's boots pulled off with a loud sucking noise. She tipped them upside down, letting the water out. She yanked her stockings off and wrung them. Sighing, she pushed her hair behind her ears.

She was alive and unharmed, but Tressa had no idea where to head. Inland, obviously. Without any direction she could wander idly for days. Starvation lurked over her shoulder. Dehydration had already taken hold. Her lips were parched, cracking, and drier than the desert she'd left only the day before.

Looking up at the sky, Tressa wondered if it would be too much for nature to provide her with some fresh rainwater. The seawater was undrinkable, and her throat screamed for even just a drop of water.

Tressa coughed as she yanked her boots back on her damp feet. She stood and wiped her hands on her leather pants. "Time to get moving."

"Who's there?"

Tressa crouched, steadying her breath. So she wasn't alone.

"I'm armed, and I will kill you if you attack me."

Tressa's head whipped from side to side. She was completely exposed on the beach. If the approaching person was in the grass, there was nowhere for her to hide. Taking a deep breath, Tressa stood again, her hands in the air. "I'm not here to hurt anyone."

The grass rustled. A young girl stood up, her head not much higher than the tall green blades. "Oh good. Because I'd hate to kill you."

Laughing, Tressa walked toward the girl. "Yes, I'm sure you would."

The little brunette couldn't have been more than ten or eleven. Tressa was relieved. And if the girl was here that meant food and drink couldn't be far away. "Can you help me find the nearest town? I need something to eat. I'm famished."

The girl glared at Tressa and tapped her foot. She pointed out to the sea. "Your boat is floating away."

Tressa glanced over her shoulder. The little vessel that had borne her here was drifting back with the tide. "I don't need it anymore."

"You must be wealthy to let something of value go." The girl smiled. "I will take you to the nearest town if you pay me. How much

gold do you have?"

"Gold? I lost it at sea," Tressa lied, biting her cracked lip, tasting blood. "The boat tipped, and all of my money fell out."

"Oh." The girl pushed a toe into the ground. "Then I can't help you." She turned on her heel and started back into the grass.

"Wait!" Tressa reached out for the girl, but before she could grab her shoulder, the girl disappeared into the grass again. In a trot, Tressa followed the moving grass. She grumbled. Why couldn't the girl just take her where she wanted to go? Didn't she realize Tressa would follow her?

The grass stopped moving. A flash of green light shot into the air. Tressa cursed under her breath. What was the girl doing now? Before she could call out and ask, a small green dragon burst from the grass. It circled over Tressa's head.

After flying in two loops, a small burst of fire popped from its mouth. A small pouch hung from its ankle.

"Great. More dragons," Tressa muttered. She marveled at the control the little girl had over her dragon form. Henry had been a few years older but couldn't control his changing well at all. In the end, his inexperience had gotten him killed. She hadn't been afraid of him then, and she wasn't going to let herself fear this child. "Come down here."

The dragon's head shook.

"Please?" Tressa asked.

The green dragon hovered over her. Then it dove to the ground at a frightening pace. Tressa reached out to catch the dragon before it hit the ground, but it stopped just a breath above her palms, then hovered carefully until its feet were on the ground. In a flash, the dragon was gone, and the girl was in front of her, fully clothed.

"How?" Tressa asked, stunned. Henry had come out of his dragon form naked. But this girl was wearing the same clothes she'd had on when she met Tressa on the beach.

The girl stuck her tongue out at Tressa. "You're not afraid of my dragon."

"I'm not," Tressa admitted. "I've seen bigger, scarier dragons than you."

"You're not going to stop bothering me, are you?"

"No, I'm not. I need help, and you're the only person I've seen. Please, just get me to the outskirts of a town. That's all I'm asking. If you're afraid to let others see you as a dragon, I swear I won't tell anyone."

"You've never been here before, have you?" she asked, her hands on her hips. "Everyone here is a dragon. You're the one who should be afraid, lady."

Tressa's hand instinctively went to her padded breastplate, making sure the small knife was hidden within it still. "Everyone here is a dragon? How is that possible?"

The girl rolled her brown eyes. "The other lands take it upon themselves to control the dragon essence. Here we share it with everyone. If a baby is born without the ability to change, we give it to them. We're all equals."

Tressa's eyes widened. A land full of possibly psychotic dragons? She wanted out, fast. "What's your name?" she asked the girl.

"Margret." The girl twirled in the grass, her fingertips skimming the tops of the blades.

"Margret, can you get me some food and water? Please? I cannot pay you in gold now, but I can have it sent to you later." Once she found Jarrett she'd ask him to pay the debt. He would in a heartbeat.

"Maybe." She curtsied.

Tressa tried not to stare while she waited for the little girl to make up her mind. "Please?"

Margret held up a hand. "Stop. I'm thinking." She grabbed Tressa's chin, pulling her down until they were eye-to-eye. Margret gazed unflinchingly into Tressa's eyes. Abruptly she let go. "Okay. Wait right here. I'll be back soon."

The green light flashed again, and before Tressa was Margret's dragon form. She took wing and flew off to the north.

Tressa sighed and sank into the grass, hoping it wouldn't take Margret too long. Every moment she was away from Jarrett was a moment when her people were still lost. She had to help them. Despite everything, she could still save the people of Hutton's Bridge.

The sun rose higher into the sky, nearly cresting before Margret flew back, a bucket clasped in each set of front claws. Slowly she descended, until Tressa could reach the buckets.

Water sloshed out of them as she carefully set them both on the ground.

"I brought you a wineskin. For water," Margret said, skipping up to Tressa. She'd changed so quickly Tressa hadn't even noticed the flash of light. "And there's plenty of food. Enough to get you through the next two days."

"Thank you so much," Tressa said as she sunk her teeth into a green apple. Tart juices sloshed in her mouth. She closed her eyes, lost in the heavenly taste of the food. Lifting the bucket to her lips, she took a long drink.

"I brought you something else," Margret said, an impish smile on her face.

"What's that?" Tressa asked.

"My brothers. They were dying to meet you."

A screech echoed in the sky as two dragons dived toward her, their claws bared.

Chapter 45

Tressa dropped to the ground. Dragon claws scraped lightly along the length of her back. She silently thanked Adara for the leather outfit. Without it, she'd probably be bleeding. Tressa jumped up and started running away from Margret and her brothers. The thick grass slowed her down, but she kept running anyway. She wouldn't let another dragon pluck her from the ground.

"Tressa, wait!" Margret yelled.

She hesitated just for a moment and looked over her shoulder. Margret stood in the grass, her head just barely clearing the tall blades. Two boys stood behind her, tall and muscular. Older brothers. Strong ones, from the looks of it.

"Tressa, we won't hurt you!" Margret yelled again. The brothers stood behind her, laughing.

Tressa paused. She bent over, wrapping her arm over her stomach. It felt like her stomach was trying to jab its way through her skin.

There was no one else to help her get to Jarrett and his men, who were on their way to Malum. She'd either have to trust these children, or she'd die trying. With them, she had a chance. If they were planning to kill her, there wasn't much she could do to defend herself against three dragons.

"Okay." Tressa held her hands up in the air. "But I swear, if one of you tries to hurt me, I'll kill you."

The taller brother, with brown hair and green eyes, laughed again. "We won't hurt you. We're a peaceful people here in the Meadowlands. If we can help you, we will."

Tressa eyed the second brother. He stood still, his face impassive. "And you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I wasn't doing anything anyway. Might as well escort you."

"It's settled, then. Which direction do we go?" Tressa glanced around her. It all looked the same. Tall, green grass. Clouds in the blue sky. Only the sun gave her some indication which way she was facing.

"Do you want to ride?" the older brother asked. "It'll be much

faster."

Tressa held back a sigh. She didn't mind riding. It hadn't been the height that bothered her during her flight with the yellow dragon. It was the utter lack of control. She'd be giving him full rein. The blue dragon, the one she thought might be Connor, had been kind to her. Maybe these three would be the same.

"It's easy. Look, I'll ride on Edmond. You ride on Peyter. I'll keep you company," Margret said, a big smile on her face.

The two young men changed into dragons even faster than Margret. In fact, Tressa didn't have time to blink when they changed. They just appeared different. It was unnerving. "They won't change like that while we're in the sky, right?" she asked Margret.

Margret giggled. "Of course not. Then we'd all die. No one wants to die today. Now hop on Peyter and let's fly!" She clambered onto her brother's back, grabbing onto scales near his shoulder blades and hooking her feet next to his wings.

Tressa looked at Peyter. With a swift prayer to whatever gods might be listening, she climbed on the same way. He was much smaller than the blue dragon had been. In some ways, it relaxed Tressa. He didn't seem so threatening. At the same time, she hoped he'd be able to support her weight for the flight. He was no bigger than the horse she'd ridden to Hutton's Bridge.

Tressa grasped two of the scales. Softness, like running her hand over the new growth of spring grass, surprised her. The blue dragon had been tough. The yellow dragon's scales were as hard as diamonds. These dragons certainly were very different than the others she'd encountered so far.

Wings outspread, Peyter lifted into the air, gliding on the breeze. No jarring bumps. No violent movements. She relaxed a little. It was possible she might actually enjoy this ride.

The sun meandered above them as the dragons flew. Margret kept up a constant banter, pointing out landmarks. Everything looked the same to Tressa. Grass upon more grass upon more grass. How Margret knew the difference was beyond Tressa's understanding. Strangely, they hadn't seen anyone else on the flight. Not another person. Not another dragon. Only animals that looked like horses, but sporting black and white stripes across their bodies. The animals looked up at them, braying and hooting. Margret named the striped animals zebras.

Tressa marveled at how different they were from the animals she'd grown up with. The stoic cows and hyper bees. She'd never imagined an animal like the ones below. There was so much in the world she had yet to explore. Despite all the trouble she'd come across, she couldn't tamp down the curiosity growing within her every day. What else was out there for her to discover?

"Almost there," Margret shouted to Tressa.

The dragons began to descend, the ground coming closer at a slow pace. She braced for a hard impact, but Peyter set down gently. His head dropped to the ground, followed by his shoulders. Tressa was able to slip to the grass without so much as a thud.

"Thank you." Tressa turned around, not surprised to see both brothers had reverted to their human forms. "Where do I go from here?"

Margret ground a toe into the dirt. "Well, there is one little thing we didn't tell you."

Alarms clanged in Tressa's mind. She knew it. There had to be a catch. Something those devious little dragons didn't tell her. "What?"

"We're trapped in here. The rulers of the Hills of Flame erected a barrier we can't cross. No green dragon has been outside the Meadowlands in a year."

"I met workers in the Sands who were from here," Tressa said. She folded her arms across her chest.

"I know. They left before. If you went to the Sands right now they would tell you they haven't met any new Greens since then. Not since the Reds caught us turning every child into a dragon. That's where you come in," Margret said.

"How am I supposed to help?" Tressa asked. "I can't use magic. I don't know anything about how to free you."

"That's where you're wrong," Peyter said. He took a couple of cautious steps toward Tressa, his hands in the air. "I won't hurt you."

It sounded like a promise, but Tressa had seen too much violence to process it as anything but a threat. She backed away from his advance, her left hand close to unsheathing one of her hidden daggers. It wouldn't be enough to permanently injure anyone, but maybe it would give her time to get away.

"Trust us," Margret pleaded.

"Why should I?" Tressa asked. "You could have told me there was a condition to your assistance. Now you've flown me away from everyone and everything. What do you plan to do with me?"

"I told you she was an idiot," Edmond said. "This isn't worth our time. She doesn't even know."

"Know what?" Tressa asked, curious, despite her trepidation.

"Only another dragon can help us through the barrier." Margret said.

"I know a couple of dragons, but unless you tell me where to go, I can't get them to help you." Tressa's heart pounded. She tried measured breathing, attempting to calm her growing irritation with these dragons. They were too young to handle their dragon side, that much was clear. No wonder the other lands put them behind a

magical barrier. They were an irresponsible danger. Or they'd get themselves hurt. These younglings didn't seem to understand that the world wasn't filled with kind people.

They stared at her. All three of them standing in a row, their eyes pleading with Tressa for help. "If you tell me where to go, then I'll come back with help, I promise."

Edmond rolled his eyes. "Next time you find an undeveloped, make sure it has some clue what it's getting into. This girl is worthless." He nudged his little sister with an elbow. In turn, she smacked his arm.

"Maybe not," Peyter said. "Give her a moment. Let her think. Maybe she'll figure it out."

Tressa glared at them, tired of the ridiculous game. She'd been a child once. She knew what it was like to taunt adults. Often they grew just as tired of her as she was growing of the dragon siblings. But then she'd been keeping them from a chore. This was different. Death whispered on the wind, reminding her every moment that her people were in danger. She needed to find Jarrett. She needed to save them.

"I'm sorry." She dropped her hands to the side, frustrated. "I just don't know what you want from me."

Margret shook her head. "We need a dragon to lead us out, Tressa."

"I know," she said. "You already told me that."

"You," Peyter said, "are that dragon."

Tressa doubled over with laughter. "Me? A dragon? You must be kidding."

The siblings looked at each other, visibly agitated.

"See, I told you she wouldn't believe us," Edmond said. He punched Peyter on the arm.

Peyter pushed him. "Shut up."

"You shut up!"

They locked arms and wrestled each other to the ground. Margaret rolled her eyes. "Boys." She placed a hand on Tressa's arm. "We wouldn't make up something like that."

"I'm not a dragon." Tressa caught her breath, swallowing the laughter. "I grew up in a place without dragons. Without magic. Even if I wanted to believe, it's completely impossible." She patted Margaret on the head. "Why did you think I was a dragon, too?"

Margaret shrugged. "There were signs I couldn't ignore. It's why I got my brothers." Both Margaret and Tressa glanced at the boys, still beating each other up. "Maybe they aren't the smartest."

Tressa smiled. "Is it true? That you can't leave the Meadowlands?"

Margaret nodded. "I wish we could. I think it's great our parents turned all of us. It's the fair thing to do, but now the rest of the Dragonlands hate us. They think we've committed blasphemy." Margaret paused. "Well, just the Red and the Yellow. The Blue left us alone."

"And the Black?" Tressa asked, curious. She'd heard so little about them. Even a nugget of information would be welcome.

Margaret rolled her eyes. "The Black is dead. No one lives there anymore. No humans, no dragons. Until the Red and Yellow trapped us here, we sent regular scouts to the Charred Barrens. Nothing. Not even a sign of life. They've been gone a long time."

Tressa felt nothing but sympathy for the girl and her brothers, who had finally given up on hurting each other. They stood, brushing off their clothes and tossing each other angry glances. She understood what it was like growing up trapped. They had their entire territory, though. And a possible way out.

"Can I walk through the barrier?" Tressa asked. She looked around, still unsure where the boundaries lay.

Margret nodded. "You can. Only the green dragons can't pass through." A small tear rolled down her cheek. "I had hoped you might be the one to get us out."

"What about your parents?" Tressa asked. "They'd miss you if you and your brothers came through with me."

Margret shrugged. "We'd find a way back to free them. This isn't just about us escaping, it's also about figuring out how to set our people free."

Tressa's heart tugged. Wasn't that exactly what she'd spent the last few months doing for her people? A way out. A way to save them. A way to bring calm and peace to the world. The people of Hutton's Bridge weren't the only ones who needed it. "I promise you, I will help you. A very good friend of mine is important in the Sands. He may be able to make a difference." One thought of Jarrett and a blush warmed her cheeks.

"Ooooooh," Margret cooed, "more than a friend, I think."

Tressa glanced at the boys out of the corner of her eye. They were paying attention, but not interested in the turn of the conversation. "That's not important," Tressa insisted. "What is important is that I know how you feel and I can try to help. If you just tell me how to get out, I can find my friend, and make an effort to get these boundaries lifted."

"Fine," Peyter said. "Go." He kicked his brother in the shin, and wiped the dirt off his pants.

"Go where?" Tressa asked. She looked around again, still not seeing anything different.

"Wherever you want, you stupid pureblood." Edmond said. "You're already through the barrier. You walked right through it, not even realizing."

"Oh." Tressa's hand flew to her mouth. She hadn't felt a thing. "Are you sure? I mean, I don't see or feel anything."

"Show her," Margret said to Peyter.

"No way." He planted his feet on the ground. "Not me."

Margret looked at Edmond, but he shook his head.

"Fine, I'll do it," Margret said. She took a deep breath, steeling her fists at her sides. She took one hesitant step. Then another, until Peyter thrust an arm out to stop her and he jumped toward Tressa.

She held her arms up in front of her, preparing for the impact. Peyter flew through the air, hitting an invisible wall. Smoke hissed around him, burning his skin. He fell to the ground, writhing. Tressa ran to him, cradling Peyter in her arms. "What was that? Is he going to be okay?" she asked.

Tears streamed down Margret's face. "He will. We have salve to heal him at home."

Edmond shoved Tressa aside. She fell to her bottom as he picked up his brother. "He shouldn't have hurt himself just to prove himself to her." He glared at Tressa. "Just go away. We don't need you here."

Tressa backed away. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You promised you'd help. Now you have a reason," Margret said, her face sad. "I really thought you had a dragon in you."

"I don't." Tressa held up her hands. "I wish I did. I wish I could free all of you right now." She looked around. The sun was slowly falling to the west. Her destination lay to the east and somewhere north. She wasn't sure where Jarrett and his men were heading. All she had was the map she'd seen in Jarrett's chambers in her head. Jarrett was somewhere out there, heading toward the Hills of Flame. That's where she would go, too.

"Goodbye, Tressa. Maybe we'll see you again someday." Margret said. Edmond had changed into a dragon, his brother, in human form, lying limp across his back.

"You will," Tressa said. "I swear it."

Margret changed into her dragon form and she and Edmond took flight.

Tressa turned back toward the east. She had nowhere to go but forward.

The tall grass slowly gave way to a shorter variety, the kind she was used to at home in Hutton's Bridge. Trees began to dot the landscape, along with the occasional stream. At least she was headed in the right direction. Unfortunately, night was quickly descending and she still hadn't found a suitable place to stop. She hefted the bag of food and water skin from Margret over her shoulder and trudged on.

Her calves ached, and her back screamed for respite, but she couldn't stop. Not until there was a place to hide from whatever lurked in the night. She hadn't forgotten the kilrothgi at Risos. Not their claws or their teeth, nor the way they could mock anyone's voice to lure their victims in. No, she had to keep moving until she found a suitable place to hide.

For days, she walked, even when she felt she had no strength to go on. One night when the full moon became the dominant light in the sky, she gave up. Climbing the nearest tree, Tressa found a high bough wide enough to hold her whole body. She relaxed, letting her shoulders fall. Tressa rubbed her legs until the tingling ceased. She took a long drink of water, nearly emptying it. The streams would provide all the drinking water she'd need tomorrow. For now, all she wanted was to close her eyes against the encroaching night.

Her head fell against the flaky bark of the tree, the leaves acting as a shield against anything below her. She was safe.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, the sound of a branch breaking caught her attention.

Someone had followed her.

Tressa held her breath. Something was below her. And its abrupt cessation of movement told her it knew she was there too. She was so tired of things lurking in the shadows waiting to kill her. Life had been so simple in Hutton's Bridge. No one wanted to kill her there. Out here, everyone was out to get her. For a moment she wished for her old life behind the fog.

But, no, she'd seen too much to ever go back to a life like that. Whatever it was, she would face it, just as she had with every other challenge the Dragonlands had presented her.

Tressa reached down to her calf, pulling out a small dagger. She tossed it in the air, catching the blade in her palm, ready to throw at the first sign of danger. It was a beautifully proportioned dagger.

Another crack drew her attention up. It, whatever it was, was on the move again.

Tressa pushed her back into the tree trunk, her legs bracing against the limbs. *Let it come*, she thought. *I'm ready*.

In the space of a breath, a shadow leapt onto her branch. She hesitated, holding back from throwing the dagger, and was glad she did.

"Tressa?"

She smiled. Finally, something had gone her way. "Jarrett." She pulled his face to hers with her free hand, letting her lips explore his.

He kissed her. "What are you doing here? I left you back at Risos. You shouldn't have followed me."

Tressa placed a finger over his lips. "I didn't follow you. After you left, they cast me out. I'll tell you all about it when there's time."

"But, Tressa, you should be in bed. You shouldn't be up and about. Not after..."

"I'm healed." A warmth washed over her heart. She was healed inside. Something had happened out there in the water. It had changed her. Made her lighter. Stronger. Ready for anything. "Trust me."

"It doesn't mean I'll stop worrying about you." He stroked a thumb on her cheek.

"Will you two cut it out?" someone called from above.

Jarrett laughed. "That's just Avital. Ignore him. He's jealous."

"Sick is more like it. You act like two love-struck children." A fake vomiting noise followed.

Tressa buried her face in Jarrett's shoulder. She swayed, her stomach lurching. Jarrett grabbed her arm. "Don't forget we're in a tree."

"Yeah," she said, taking a few quick breaths. She'd been so relieved she had forgotten to brace herself. "I won't forget again. So, tell me, what are you doing in this tree, and how many men do you have with you?"

"We're hiding up here. Presumably for the same reason as you. I have only a handful of men. We are scattered in trees across the outer edge of the forest, trying to keep our crew a secret from those who dwell in the Hills of Flame. I saw you sneaking around on the ground and followed you to this tree."

Tressa gazed out between the leaves. An uncountable number of trees dotted the landscape. "Have you any word of the people from Hutton's Bridge?"

Jarrett shook his head. "I wish. We've questioned many on the way here, but no one has seen them. Or they've been threatened with their lives to keep the secret. Someone has to have seen something. Those people couldn't have simply disappeared."

"I agree," Tressa said. "We'll find them. We have to. I can't rest until we do."

They sat in silence for a few moments. No more comments were made from above. Instead, the quiet night was punctuated by the occasional snore.

"I think we're alone now," Jarrett said.

Tressa's eyelids felt heavy. The last few days had taken a toll on her. Now that she was back in Jarrett's arms, she might be able to relax.

"I'm so, so sorry for the way Jacinda treated you. I never should have brought you home with me." Remorse tinged his words.

"Yet here we are with a small group of men willing to fight for my people."

"The cost was too great." Jarrett's eyes softened. He tightened his arm around Tressa's waist. "Your baby is gone."

"I had no time to fall in love with the baby," Tressa said. "I only experienced it as a loss, just like I did all the other times I attempted to get pregnant. It is a blessing I didn't know until I lost it." She laid her hands on his cheeks. "It gives me hope for the future that I might conceive again."

His quiet response was a simple kiss. A promise.

Tressa wanted to tell him they'd be together. That her next baby would be his. But it was a fool's dream. They'd have to survive. Then they'd have to see if they even liked each other when they weren't surrounded by danger. She still loved Bastian...but too much had changed. She had changed.

She settled back into Jarrett's arms and closed her eyes. "Tomorrow?"

"We find them tomorrow. I swear it to you."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," she said through a yawn.

"Sleep, now. Trust me."

She fell asleep without another word.

* * *

THE SUN WOKE THEM UP, a tangle of arms and legs resting on a thick bough.

"I'm coming down. Better have your clothes back on!" A rustle above them preceded a man dropping to their bough. It bounced, threatening to toss Tressa and Jarrett to the ground. Tressa's arms flailed as she attempted to wrap her arms around the trunk.

"If I didn't need you so much, I'd consider pushing you to the ground," Jarrett said with a friendly snarl. "This," he said, turning to Tressa, "is Avital. He not only excels in fake puking, but he also happens to be one of the best swordsmen in the Dragonlands."

Avital bowed with a flourish, one arm behind his back, the other stretching in front of him. He bobbed to the side, waving his hands in the air.

Tressa gasped. "He reminds me of you."

"Yes," Jarrett said, a smile on his face. "We are brothers, sharing the same mother."

"You haven't seen my nards yet. Let me show you. I'm just as big as Jarrett." Avital fiddled with the strings on his pants.

Jarrett slapped his brother's hands. "Stop!"

"Hey, those are delicate parts you're slapping. Show a little respect."

Tressa chuckled, watching the two brothers interact. She'd rarely seen Jarrett as anything other than serious. It was nice to see this side of him.

"Let's take this to the ground where I can fight you for my honor." Avital grabbed onto the branch, swinging down the tree like a monkey in one of the books Granna had read Tressa when she was a child. He landed on the ground, squatting and beating his chest. "Come on! I challenge you!"

Jarrett shook his head, a small smile on his face. "My brother

enjoys acting asinine. But, I swear, when it comes to battle, or even meeting dignitaries, he's the most serious man on the field. You'll be glad he's with us."

"I believe you," Tressa said. She was glad for the moment of silliness. It was good to relax once in a while. To let her guard down. To know the world held more than sadness and death.

After they made their way to the ground, Jarrett introduced Tressa to the rest of his men. She couldn't keep their names straight, but promised them she'd work hard on learning them. She expected them to balk at her insistence on fighting, but no one batted an eye. They accepted her for who she was.

"Today we find the residents of Hutton's Bridge. No matter what comes, we need to save them and find out if the Red has secured the honey. We mustn't let the honey fall into their hands. It will mean the death of all of us."

The men solemnly agreed. Not once did they question Jarrett or accuse him of being on a fool's errand. As she'd hoped, these were more Jarrett's men than Jacinda's. For the first time in months Tressa had a real chance at saving the villagers.

Tressa looked at the group of men in front of her. These were hardened soldiers. Men accustomed to fighting. Men who were here because battle was in their blood. Not because they were promised coin and whores. Maybe they could rescue her people.

Though exactly how they were going to do it was still a mystery. The forest canopy spread over them, stretching as far as the eye could see. Out there, somewhere, were her people. She would find them and bring them home.

And then? Tressa shook her head, refusing to think beyond her current goal. She'd spent her life making plans, none of which mattered now. She lived in a new, uncertain world.

Jarrett pulled off his boots and held them upside down. Pebbles and dirt fell to the ground. He tossed her an intimate smile. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "But where are we going?"

"Forward." He pointed to the northeast with his boot. "We're going to find out why the Red sent their kilrothgi to the Yellow. I have a feeling they were after something very important."

"What?" Tressa asked, squinting into the rising sun.

"You."

"Me?" She was taken aback. "What would they want me for?"

"Why would they want the people of Hutton's Bridge?" He slipped the boot back on his foot and repeated the same on his left.

"The honey. But I don't have the honey. I don't know how to make it. I didn't even know it did anything special. There's no reason they would want me." Tressa sat down on a rock, her back against Avital's back.

Avital's back straightened. "The Red takes what they please. They fancy themselves the rulers of the Dragonlands. In truth, the rest of us only tolerate their childish claims."

"Except for the way you all control the Meadowlands. Clearly there is some sort of hierarchy here," Tressa said pointedly. She hadn't told them yet about what she'd learned there.

"The Meadowlands did something anathema. The dragon form isn't for everyone. They've taken a well-guarded secret and exploited it." Jarrett pulled his boot back on and straightened his tunic. "They had to be contained before the secret got out. Can you imagine the rebellion if the common people knew they could be changed into dragons? Our society depends on the secret. Without it we'd have dragons flying around everywhere, doing as they please."

"Control the dragons, rule the realm," Tressa whispered.

"I heard that," Avital said. "It's true. The dragons think they rule. Those of us who know about them and keep them in check truly rule." He nudged her side. "No more talk of the dragons. The rest of the men are coming back from the stream."

"They don't know?" Tressa asked, stunned. "They should. They put their lives in harm's way without knowing what they're really fighting for."

"It is the way," Jarrett said. "It works."

"Then maybe my people should have stayed trapped in Hutton's Bridge. It worked."

"It did." One of the men chimed in. "We wouldn't have this disaster to deal with. Now look at what we have to do. We're marching on the Malum, where the Red Queen resides, demanding she return your people to you." He held up a hand before Tressa could respond. "I don't support anyone being subjugated, but sometimes people need to do what's best for the greater good."

Tressa fumed. The greater good? Her palm itched for a sword, but common sense told her to stay her hand. These men might not agree with her, but they were still willing to help. The world was a strange place, and people stranger still.

"Enough discussion." Jarrett waved the stragglers over. "It's time to move. We need to get closer to the castle. Their queen won't see me without a royal request. Jacinda refused to give that. We will need to be more creative when it comes to entering their compound."

"What exactly do you propose?" a man with curly blond hair asked.

"It is the Descent Festival. As you all know, the Hills of Flame are populated with descendants of the ancients from the east. They continue to worship the fabled Queen of All Dragons. There will be celebrations throughout the countryside. The people will be dressed in costume. They will perform fertility rituals. Burn bonfires. Inebriation will run rampant. It is the best time for us to sneak in."

"You really think they'll let down their guard because of a holiday?" a man named Brandon asked. He ran a hand through his hair, his blue eyes flashing. "If we go in like fools, we will die like fools."

"I had hoped we'd find the people of Hutton's Bridge before now."

But we haven't. If they've been taken by the Red, we need to get to Malum."

"And if they haven't?" Brandon asked.

Tressa watched Jarrett's face carefully. He didn't seem perturbed by the line of questioning. She had assumed his men would follow him unconditionally. Instead they seemed to work off each other, bouncing around ideas until the best one could be found. It was an intriguing way to run an army. Fascinating. She'd grown up under Granna's gentle dictatorship. Granna was not to be questioned. Ever. This seemed like a better way to run things, assuming all parties could be trusted.

"Then we leave." Jarrett said. He clapped his hands. "So, what do you think?"

"Do all of us need to go to the celebrations?" Hayden asked. "I refuse to mate with someone from the Hills of Flame just for a mission. It's disgusting. Their women, they don't..."

He trailed off, rolling his eyes. The other men laughed.

Tressa was curious what they didn't do. She looked at Jarrett, but he didn't offer anything. Was it something she did? Or didn't do? Jarrett didn't seem to find her repulsive.

"No," Jarrett said, slapping his man on the shoulder. "I don't expect anyone to sleep with anyone they find abhorrent. It's against what we stand for, anyway."

"Life. Choice. Honor." The men chanted it together, their fists pounding against their chests with each word.

Tressa wanted to ask how they'd become such honorable men with a queen like Jacinda. Perhaps later when she and Jarrett were alone he could answer all of her questions.

"What I need from my men is a way in. A distraction to allow Tressa, Avital, and myself to steal costumes and sneak into the city gates. From there we will do what we can to find her people."

"Yes, sir. And what should we do after you are in?" Hayden asked.

"Go home. We will succeed or die. Either way, I don't want you to be in danger any longer than necessary."

Tressa nodded; it wasn't their battle. It was hers. She was grateful they'd followed Jarrett into an unknowable outcome. It was more than enough. She looked at Avital. He seemed to want to help them too. "You don't have to come." She laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"Leave Jarrett to his own devices? I think not. I let him slink off to Ashoom with Henry, and what happened? Henry got himself killed and he came out with you." Avital laughed. "I guess he does all right on his own. No one liked Henry anyway. He would have been a terrible king. And you..." Avital looked her up and down. "You're not so bad. You put a smile on my brother's face. I like that."

Tressa smiled. Jarrett had put a smile on her face too. "Thank you for helping me." She meant it with a depth he couldn't possibly understand. Not yet. Maybe someday.

Avital pulled Tressa into a hug. "Keep my brother happy," he whispered into her ear, "and I will be your greatest champion."

"And if I don't?" she asked.

"I'll gut you from belly button to the top of your throat. If you do anything to harm him, I will kill you slowly. Painfully. You will regret the day you met Jarrett and wish you'd never given him a second look." Avital let go of her and smiled. He winked.

Tressa froze, unsure if he'd been teasing her or serious. Without another word, Avital rejoined his brother, not leaving another glance for Tressa.

Her stomach flipped. She'd have to watch her back.

Tressa squinted, attempting to see more clearly through the dragon mask on her face. The long snout of the dragon blocked a full view of what lie in front of her. All she needed to do was scope out the people at the celebration. Look for a face she recognized hidden under the masks. Or a voice she knew from her childhood. A familiar gait. Anything that would help her find her people.

Jarrett had warned her that if the villagers had been taken by force, they wouldn't find any of them at the festival. They were likely hidden in dungeons far beneath the ground.

"There's always the chance they went voluntarily," Tressa had insisted as they dressed for the festival. They had stolen three costumes. A sparkly black dragon with gossamer wings for Tressa. Two simple green dragons for Jarrett and Avital. Tressa had objected at first. She didn't want to stand out any more than Jarrett or Avital. Everyone had assured her she would stand out even more without the costume.

"I can pass for a man," Tressa insisted.

"You've done that long enough already," Jarrett said. "You are a woman and it's acceptable to embrace that. You no longer need to hide."

Tressa grudgingly agreed. She was a woman, after all. She'd never wanted to hide as a man and she'd only done it to get closer to Stacia in her efforts to kill that evil woman. But maybe if she hadn't pretended to be Jarrett's betrothed, she would still be pregnant. Being herself didn't keep her from harm in the Sands.

Still, she had pulled the dress over her body. It clung in all the right places. Jarrett helped place the wings on the back of the dress, held on by a series of ties. He caressed her shoulders, his hands slipping over them, only a fingertip away from her breasts. She'd taken a deep breath, steadying herself. It wasn't time. Not yet. Work before pleasure.

Tressa, Jarrett, and Avital said goodbye to the other men and ventured through the city gates. Guards flanked the iron rods topped with spikes. In their red jackets, dipping down to their knees, lined

with black satin, and black leather pants, they looked every inch the assassin. Even their grim expressions, frozen in a permanent frown, gave them an air of unrelenting displeasure.

Tressa shuddered, but neither of them glanced at her. Their eyes were trained on an invisible threat in the distance, not a mere young woman in festival attire. Jarrett and Avital ambled along behind her, laughing and clanking their tankards in a toast to anything and everything coming to mind. Ale flew in drops with each clink, wetting not just them but the people around them.

No one seemed to care. They were all lost in their own merrymaking. It was the Night of the Dragon. The night before their most holy day of the year. Tonight they celebrated, knowing the morning would only bring fasting and repentance.

In Hutton's Bridge, Tressa didn't adhere to any religion. Granna had told her of the Old Ones, but it all seemed like a bigger fantasy than the dragons she also hadn't believed in. Tressa hoped the old stories were myth, faded into religion. Granna told her fear controlled many of their beliefs. Fear of the afterworld. Fear of displeasing the gods. Fear held the people of the Hills of Flame in check.

Tressa glanced at the revelers around her, who were delighting in each other's bodies. Drinking with abandon. This night was reserved for excess and indulgence, and the people of the Hills of Flame appeared to be taking full advantage of the night.

Women raced around half-dressed. Men chased them, only to catch another woman's lips. No one seemed to mind the drunken orgies in the street, nor did the various sexual acts being performed lend themselves to any sort of modesty.

"Are you okay here?" Jarrett asked, whispering in her ear while nibbling on the lobe.

"Yes, but are you doing that because you want to or because you want to fit in with the rest of them?" Tressa asked.

"Both," Jarrett said, waggling his eyebrows.

Tressa couldn't hold in a laugh.

"Good, now you're fitting in like everyone else." Jarrett nudged her arm and pointed to Avital who'd found a woman to fondle. They both seemed to be enjoying the moment.

"I'd suggest splitting up, but I'm not sure I want to leave you alone here." Jarrett eyed the people around them.

"I can take care of myself," Tressa insisted. "We could cover more ground if we separate."

"The men out here won't hesitate to take a piece of you, or drag you into a dark corner." Jarrett's eyes darkened. "If you don't give yourself willingly, they will rape you."

Tressa's eyebrows rose. "But everyone here seems so willing.

Wouldn't they just find another woman who would be happy to please them?"

"Tressa," Jarrett said, snaking an arm around her waist, "everyone who is here is willing to please anyone else. It's an unspoken agreement. Any woman who fights is only adding to the drama of the night. It's all an act. They won't understand if you don't submit."

She took another glance at the people on the street. Some of them did appear to be resisting advances from other revelers. One man kept pushing a woman backward, but she'd only come back at him again, knocking him down with a leather boot that crept up past her knee. Her dress fell to the side, revealing her lack of undergarments. The man's eyes widened. He hesitated, just long enough for her to fall on top of him. His hands explored every bit of her body. Tressa tore her eyes away, suddenly embarrassed. She'd never watched anyone else in the act of sex. It wasn't something she wanted to start doing.

"I see what you mean. Perhaps we should stay together. I don't want my intentions to be...misinterpreted." Tressa snuggled in closer to Jarrett, nipping his neck and leaving a red stain from the makeup his men had stolen for her. "Now let's search for my people in case they're here. They'll be the shy ones. They'll stand out."

"Sometimes when people are given a new path, they don't hesitate to change everything about themselves. All they once knew can fly out the window in one kiss." Jarrett let his hand fall to her bottom.

Tressa didn't respond. After finding her own way in the world and meeting Jarrett, she had changed from the woman she thought she was. She couldn't pinpoint one moment exactly. Yet now she wasn't Tressa Webb from Hutton's Bridge. She was Tressa, a woman who wanted to explore the world. Who didn't want to be tied down to a dream that was no longer something she craved.

No, she needed something different. Maybe she could find it with Jarrett.

They walked through the town, touching and fondling each other. When Jarrett caressed her breast with his thumb, she had to fight the urge to pull him into a dark alley and have her way with him. She had to have him soon or she'd explode. A dull ache between her legs reminded her of the loss she'd suffered. Maybe it was too soon physically, but it didn't tamp down her emotions.

Tressa grabbed his hand, lacing it in hers. She squeezed. "We have to tone it down a bit. It's becoming too difficult."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one feeling that way." Jarrett growled deep in his throat. He grabbed Tressa's shoulders, pushing her up against a nearby wall. He ripped the dragon mask off her face and his lips crushed against hers, telling Tressa in no uncertain terms that he couldn't hold himself back any longer. Her fingernails scratched up

and down his back as she pressed her breasts into his chest. She wanted him, too. Now.

Until a nearby sound caught her attention. "Stop," she muttered into his lips. Tressa pushed on his shoulders.

Jarrett stepped backward. "I'm sorry. It was too much, too fast. This is the wrong place."

"No." Tressa placed a finger over his swollen lips. "I heard a voice I recognize. They're here."

Tressa pushed Jarrett off. He took a step back and adjusted the front of his pants.

"Who did you hear?" he asked, a little breathless.

Tressa straightened out her dress and pulled her dragon mask back over her face. Peering out the tiny eyeholes, she searched the crowd for Adam's unmistakable red hair. All she saw were other dragons like herself. People in various states of celebration and undress.

"He won't be one of the people cavorting. Not Adam." She directed Jarrett to the right while she prepared to go left. "He's of medium height, flaming red hair like Bastian. Adam is Bastian's uncle. If you find him first, that's information you can use to prove you know who he is. Tell him I'm here too."

"We're not splitting up," Jarrett said, grabbing her hand.

She yanked it back. "We have to. This may be our only chance to find the people of Hutton's Bridge." She pushed him a little more, her eyes wild. "Go. Now!" Tressa pleaded with Jarrett. "We'll meet here again when the moon is at its zenith. Hopefully one of us will have Adam."

"Okay, okay. I can't say no to you." Jarrett kissed her hand; he couldn't reach her lips with the dragon mask in the way. "We'll meet back at the monument before the moon begins to lower." He pointed to the center of the town square where an effigy of a red dragon rose into the night sky, its eyes lit up by burning flames.

"Soon." Tressa's chest rose with her deep inhalation. She looked to the right, her eyes following the mop of red hair through the crowd. Adam wasn't as tall as Bastian, but amongst the people in costume he stood out.

She lifted her skirt to keep it from tripping her up and followed Adam as fast she could without drawing attention to herself. She was relieved Jarrett was headed in another direction. She didn't want Jarrett here for her reunion with Adam. They'd meet each other soon enough, but she needed some time alone with the man who'd been her substitute father.

As she drew closer, her heart thudded. It had been so long. Much

had changed. She no longer loved his nephew. Not the way she had back home in Hutton's Bridge. But her love for Adam, as a dear friend and father figure, would never change. She reached out, laying fingertips on his arm. "Adam."

He spun around, facing her. "Who are you? How do you know my name?" He squinted, examining her from head to toe.

Of course he didn't recognize her with the mask. Tressa pulled the dragon face off and smiled. "It's me. Tressa."

Adam drew in a sharp gasp. He pulled her into a desperate embrace. "You're alive! I had hoped — " He let go. "But where's Bastian?"

Tressa laid a soft hand on Adam's cheek. "He's not with me, but I know where he is. We'll all be reunited soon."

Adam's eyes clouded over. "What are you doing here alone? It's not safe. You must leave. Now. Before they get you."

She clasped his arms. "No. That's why I'm here. To help. I had feared you'd been brought here against your will. Are there others from Hutton's Bridge here too?"

Adam's eyes closed. He nodded. "Yes. We are all here. They tricked us. Said they'd help us and brought us here. But Tressa, it was all a lie. A terrible, awful lie." He took a stuttering breath. "There are things happening here, things you wouldn't believe."

"You'd be surprised how much I'd believe these days. I've seen things — things I never thought could be real." Images flashed in her mind. Humans changing into dragons. Kilrothgi. Jarrett's body in the moonlight.

Adam grabbed her hand. "Come with me."

He tugged, but Tressa didn't move. "Where? To the rest of our people?"

Adam nodded. "They're hiding not far from here." He took a few steps and then paused. "There is danger ahead. Are you sure you want to come with me?"

She patted her hip, feeling the hidden steel against her leg. "Yes, take me. I want to help you escape."

Adam chuckled. "You always were a scrappy girl. I'm not sure we'll all be able to sneak out of here without being noticed, but at least we'll be together."

Tressa followed him through the winding crowd. She glanced up at the moon. It wasn't long until she was supposed to meet with Jarrett by the monument. Hopefully it wasn't too much farther. She'd assess the situation and report back to Jarrett. They'd sneak her people out of Malum before anyone noticed they were gone.

"We're hiding in an old building not far from here," Adam said.

"Hiding?" Tressa asked, confused. "Were you brought here against

your will? Will they let you leave? If you're hiding, then you must have at least escaped some of their guards." It didn't make sense to her. She quickly ran through all the possible scenarios, but none of them seemed right. Tressa looked to Adam for an explanation.

"I know, it seems strange. We were brought here under the guise of good intentions. They promised to help us. And then..." His voice trailed off.

"And then what?" Tressa didn't appreciate the tone of his words. He was a physic, a man of answers. Perhaps something traumatic had happened to him on the way. Still, he needed to snap out of whatever it was.

"And then we were given a choice," he said. "We were brought to the queen and she offered two options."

Tressa's impatience grew with every breath. "Those choices were...?"

"Here it is," Adam said. He tugged her hand, pulling her toward the door of a dilapidated building.

Tressa dug her heels into the ground, suddenly apprehensive. Her instincts screamed at her to run. She peered into Adam's eyes. No. It was him. Her old friend. The man who'd had a hand in raising her. She had to trust him. Put away her fears and follow him into the building where her people probably hid, cowering in fear of being discovered. Now wasn't the time for second-guessing herself.

"Afraid?" Adam asked. "I promise you, no harm will come to you here."

Tressa relaxed. "No, of course I'm not afraid." She followed him through the doorway, the dank air assaulting her senses. Within only a few steps, she'd gone blind. The night had joined with the building, plunging them into complete darkness. Mold spores danced in the air. Tressa sneezed into her sleeve. "It's so unpleasant in here."

"It is," Adam agreed. "It is the only place that we could find to hide until we can sneak out of the city."

Another twenty steps and Adam came to an abrupt halt. Tressa bumped into his back. She left her hands on his shoulders. "Are we there? Is everyone here? Udor? Hazel? The children?"

No one answered. A collective wind of breaths swirled around her.

"Hello? It's me. It's Tressa. I've come to help you."

Again. No answer.

Adam's hand let go of hers. Tressa reached out, fumbling in the dark. "Adam?" Her heart pounded. It all rushed back. Being in the fog. Alone. Unable to see.

Tressa's hands flailed in the air. Nerak. Where was Nerak? Her little owl had abandoned her.

Her legs trembled, unable to support her weight. Tressa sank to her

knees. Her sword clattered on the wooden plank floor. She shook her head.

She wasn't in the forest. She was in Malum. With her steel. A trained warrior. She didn't need to be afraid of a little darkness. She had her people to save.

Tressa steeled her fists and stood. "Where is everyone. Adam?"

A cacophony of scrabbling and scratching filled the empty void. Cries. Wails. Screams. They swirled around her head in a fury.

She'd been tricked.

"Whoever you are, I will kill you. I won't hesitate. And I have friends nearby. They'll be here soon."

A cackle echoed in the empty room. With a snap of fingers, braziers burst into life. Tressa threw an arm over her face, letting her eyes adjust to the sudden light.

"You won't kill me."

Tressa whipped around, facing the man who'd spoken.

Her father, his eyes slitted and glowing red.

She opened her mouth, prepared to offer a retort. But she couldn't. It was her father. Changed. But the same man she'd seen not long ago in the forest.

As her vision became clearer, she could see the people of Hutton's Bridge behind him, crouched on the ground, their eyes feral. Udor. Carrac. Mariah. Dirt smeared across their faces. Their teeth bared.

"What is this?" She refused to let confusion take over her senses. She needed answers. Now.

"We did not find what we were looking for. But perhaps you can help us." He turned and looked over his shoulder. "Bring her!"

Two men stepped forward, their hands grasping Hazel's arms. She struggled against them. "I won't help you. I swear it. I'd rather die," Connor's wife begged, gazing into Tressa's eyes. "Kill me. Please kill me." Tears of blood streamed down her cheeks.

"Where is her husband? Connor? The beekeeper?" Fenn asked.

"He's dead!" Hazel screamed, her voice shredded and sore. "I told you that a million times."

"What?" Tressa shook her head. "You want Connor? Is this about the honey?"

The smirk dropped from her father's face. "What do you know about the honey? You? A mere mortal? What do you know?" His hands gripped into fists and then relaxed. Over and over again. As if he were squeezing an invisible person's throat.

"Hazel, I won't tell. I swear to you. No one will find your love." Tressa looked at the others around her. Their eyes vacant. Their limbs hanging without purpose, swaying with the light breeze whispering in the cave. Tongues out to the side.

Their arms and legs shifted, changing into dragons right before her eyes. Their human bodies taken from them as the dragons they'd become took over.

"You'll never escape my new army, Tressa. Either you tell us where Connor is or you die."

"Not today." She turned on one heel, saying a silent prayer under her breath for Hazel, and fled from the building.

Chapter 51

The cobalt dragon swooped into Malum, ignoring the screams of the people scattered below. Bastian laughed at their dragon masks. Elinor had filled him in on the way, telling him about the festival the Red celebrated. They'd searched the countryside, asking villagers if they'd seen a mass exodus of people. In one tiny village, a child had eagerly spoken of a horde of dragons ferrying people back and forth one day. It was all Bastian had needed to hear to convince him his people had been taken by the Red.

In droves the people ran, shrieking, cowering around corners.

Perhaps they thought Connor a ghost of Stacia. Word must not have reached the Hills of Flame of the new dragon. Bastian gripped onto Connor's scales. They would know now. And they would hand over his people or they would die.

It was to be that simple. He was done tiptoeing around the realm, waiting for other people to take the lead. He'd never wanted to be a leader, nor did he crave it for his future. But he would not let his daughter or Connor's sons be taken captive by anyone.

Elinor held tight to his chest, her nails digging into his muscles. Yet she didn't hide. Her head was held high as Connor swooped up and down, scattering the crowd into pockets of terrified revelers.

They'd agreed before leaving the Blue that no innocents would be hurt as long as they could get their people back. If they had to fight, though, they wouldn't hesitate to kill.

Bastian's eyes swept the city, looking for any sign of his people, but there wasn't one child to be seen. Not at this bacchanal. The people were in various states of undress. Another day Bastian might have been interested, tempted to join them, but not tonight.

A scream pierced the night. Long. Bloodcurdling. Not fear, but pure anger mixed with terror. And he recognized that voice.

Tressa.

Bastian yanked Connor to a hard right. It was enough to alert his friend as to the direction he wanted him to go. Connor's head listed to the side as his massive body glided through the air.

His eyes sharp, Bastian kept a look out for Tressa.

It wasn't more than a few breaths before he spotted her.

She ran, sword in hand, toward the center of the town square.

A horde of red dragons scabbled after her, their claws scraping against the cobbled bricks. They were small, but their teeth and claws told Bastian they were more than prepared to tear Tressa to pieces if they could only catch her.

"Not on my watch!" Bastian screamed, drawing his sword from its scabbard. "Are you ready?" he asked Elinor over his shoulder.

"I am."

They'd agreed Elinor wouldn't jump into the fray. Instead she'd stay off to the side and assist with any injured people from Hutton's Bridge. Her skills lay in healing, and that was where she wanted to focus her efforts.

Connor landed with a jolt, and Bastian jumped off his back. He didn't give another glance to Elinor. She knew what to do, and he trusted her to do it.

Bastian's feet hit the cobblestones, and he took off running. Tressa hadn't seen him yet. Her eyes were searching the crowds, looking for another. Jarrett probably. Bastian reminded himself not to care.

Bastian changed course, angling toward Tressa. The small dragons were gaining on her. He wanted to get to her before they did.

"Tressa!" he yelled, spittle flying out of his mouth.

She looked toward him, her eyes growing wide. "Bastian! You're here!" Her eyes traveled over his shoulder, finally seeing the huge cobalt dragon behind him. "Is that Connor?"

Bastian nodded. He pulled up next to her, panting, but still holding his sword aloft. "It is. He's...changed."

Tressa nodded. There wasn't any surprise on her face. Only acceptance. "That's what I thought. You have to go back. Tell him not to attack the dragons behind us." She turned and faced the dragon horde coming after her.

"What?" Bastian twitched, not sure what to do. His instincts screamed at him to fight. Why wouldn't she? It was clear they meant nothing but harm.

"Those dragons," she yelled, pointing at them, coming ever closer, "are the people of Hutton's Bridge. We can't hurt them."

"No!" Bastian said. "My daughter. Is Farah among them?"

Tressa shook her head. "I didn't see any children before they changed. Only adults. Udor and Carrac and Mariah. So many others. I spoke with Adam, though he was the one who led me to them." She rested a hand on Bastian's arm. "We can't trust him."

Bastian's eyes darkened. "He's not the only one. Your father –"

"Yes, I know," Tressa said. "He's also one of them. When did all of this go so wrong?"

"I don't know, but we can't stand here and wonder. Let's get back to Connor. Escape." He tugged on her sleeve, trying not to be distracted by the low-cut gown she wore.

Tressa yanked her arm away from him. "I can't. Jarrett's out there somewhere. I have to save him first. And his brother, Avital. I won't leave without them." She ran off in the direction she'd originally been heading.

Bastian ventured another look at the dragons. They were so close he could smell their rancid breath. Bastian took off after Tressa. He would help her find her friends. Her lover. Maybe her husband by now. Just thinking it pissed Bastian off. Still, he would leave no one behind. Not if it could be helped.

He followed her through the town square to the monument rising in the center. Jarrett arrived at the same time, coming from the opposite direction.

"Where's Avital?" Tressa asked him, out of breath.

"I don't know, but he can take care of himself," Jarrett said. He glanced at Bastian.

Bastian nodded back, not saying a word. What would he say to the man who'd stolen his love right out from underneath him?

"Let's get out of here," Bastian said. "We can ride out on Connor." He hoped Elinor had stayed close to Connor. Things were getting too hot to run around looking for her.

"Wait!" Jarrett yelled. He grabbed Tressa, pulling her into him. "Bastian, stop!"

Bastian stumbled to a halt. "Why? Connor is our only way out of here. If our people are dragons now, there isn't anything we can do to save them."

Jarrett pointed toward Connor with one shaky hand, "I'm so, so sorry."

Bastian turned just in time to see Connor rear up on his back legs. He took in a deep breath, his belly expanding.

"No!" Bastian screamed to his friend. But the noises around them were too loud. There was too much chaos. Connor couldn't hear him.

The fire roared out of his mouth, enveloping the red dragon horde in a dancing blaze. Red, orange, and gold flames licked across them, burning. Screams whispered on the wind as the dragons fell to the ground, writhing in the dragon flame.

Each dragon began the change back. Arms and legs erased the dragon limbs. Familiar faces, twisted in smoke. Flesh melted. Eyes wide in terror. Adam in the front, an arm held out toward them.

Nothing could stop it.

It was too late.

Connor had killed them all.

"No!" Tressa screamed.

In Bastian's mind, her scream went on for many breaths. Never stopping. She bucked against Jarrett's tight hold around her waist. Tears streamed down her cheeks, echoing the tears falling from Bastian's eyes.

"He didn't know," he said to Tressa. "He wouldn't have done it. He didn't know."

A hand touched Bastian's arm. He looked down. Elinor. She'd found him. He collapsed into her small arms, letting her bear his sorrow. He sank to his knees, burying his head in her stomach, his tears wetting her dress.

Elinor's small hands ran through his hair. Her kisses dotted his head. "I'm so sorry, Bastian. So, so sorry."

The cobalt dragon roared, then collapsed, transforming into the man. Connor ran over to them. Bastian tossed Connor a change of clothes, but Connor let them fall to the ground. "Who are those people? Who did I just kill?" He looked from Bastian to Tressa. "What happened?"

"Connor." It was Elinor. Her voice was so soft, even Bastian didn't hear the words that followed. He did hear Connor's keen.

"I was only trying to save you. I didn't know. I swear, I didn't."

Bastian looked up. Wiping his tears on his sleeve, he stood, clasping his friend. "You did the right thing."

"I killed them!" Connor grabbed his hair, yanking so hard tufts tore out. He shrugged off Bastian.

Tressa had calmed, but she still clung to Jarrett. "We were set up. Those bastards. They knew I was coming. I was lured there. They knew, dammit. How did they know?"

Her chest rose and fell with ragged breaths, each one growing in anger. Bastian fought his instincts. He wouldn't punch Jarrett and take her in his own arms. She was where she wanted to be. Where she'd chosen to be.

"I don't know," Jarrett said. "We were careful. No one should have known we were here."

"Who is their ruler?" Fire burned in Tressa's eyes. "I will have their head. They did this. They brought my people here. Set them up to die. And the children. Where are they?"

"We are only six. A healer, four warriors, and a dragon. We cannot take on the Red Queen. It is impossible. Our only hope in this mission was to free your people. Smuggle them out," Jarrett said.

"We failed." Tressa's words were spat out in disgust. "I refuse to just leave the rest behind."

"Then fight, daughter."

The five spun around. Tressa's father, Fenn, stood in front of them.

With a cackle he transformed into a dragon, taller, wider, stronger than Connor had been moments ago.

Chapter 52

"Oh shit," Bastian mumbled under his breath.

The red dragon spread a vast pair of black wings and snorted at the group. The fetid cloud enveloped them. Everyone but Elinor coughed. She'd been smart enough to draw her arm over her mouth and nose.

"Connor?" Bastian asked.

He didn't answer. Naked, he ran off to the side, changing faster than Bastian had ever seen him transform before.

The cobalt dragon faced the red, his jaws open, saliva dripping from between his teeth. Connor was ready for blood.

Tressa's sword whizzed as she brandished it in the air. "I'll ride Connor again." Before she could run toward him, Bastian grabbed her arm.

"You'll stay right here," he said.

Jarrett grabbed her other arm. "Bastian is right. You're not going anywhere. Getting in between these two would only lead to your death."

"I did it before," she insisted between gritted teeth. "I can do it again."

"You got lucky," Jarrett said. "Stacia was half the size of this dragon. She was weak, arrogant."

"And you think he isn't?" Tressa spat on the ground. "My father will die, and I want to be the one to run him through."

Jarrett dropped his grip on her. "Your father?" He gazed up at the dragon that was circling Connor, his claws bared, aggressive jaws snapping.

"Yes. At least he was. Once upon a time. I don't know what happened to him. Why he's turned into..." her lips snarled, "this thing."

"Bastian! Oh, Bastian!" Bastian spun around. A woman came running through the now deserted square.

"Mother!" He let go of Tressa and took off running. He caught his mother's hand in his and pulled her to the safety of their group by the monument. "Are you okay? I've been worried about you." After he realized Fenn had been lying to him, he worried for her safety. She collapsed into his arms, her chest heaving.

"Bastian?" He heard Elinor talking to him, but he ignored her. His

mother's safety was most important.

"Fenn is – "

Jayne placed a finger over his lips. "I know. Fenn is the dragon. He's changed."

"Are you okay?" Bastian asked. He ran his hands over her hair. She was so small compared to him. Such a tiny wisp of a woman, but she was his mother and he would forever be her little boy.

"Bastian!" This time it was Tressa. What was their problem?

A tug on his shirt interrupted his next question. He shrugged it off. Then a strange sensation bit into his arms. Like claws tearing at flesh. Blood gushing from an open wound. Eyes wide, he looked down at his mother.

Her eyes glowed a bright red. A slash of obsidian ran marred the red glow.

"No," he said. He tried to step backward. To get away, but her claws were embedded in his skin.

"I would suggest staying right where you are," she said, a forked tongue sticking out between her lips. "If you move, you'll bleed out. I wouldn't want that to happen. Would you?"

Bastian shook his head. He'd come here, expecting to play the hero just like he had in the misty forest. Just like he had when he'd saved Elinor from the kilrothgi and when he'd challenged Connor. Not once had he really thought he'd die.

Now his mother, the woman who'd brought him into this world, held his life in her talons.

He heard footsteps coming behind him. "Stay back," he shouted over his shoulder. The footsteps stopped abruptly.

"He's right," Jayne said in a sweet voice. "I'll kill him if any of you get closer. Now, where is Connor? He is the beekeeper, is he not? I know he's not the dark one." She pointed at Jarrett. "There were no dark-skinned people in Hutton's Bridge. Those filthy buggers are from the Sands. I see no other men with you. Now where is he?"

Bastian glanced up at Connor, still in a stalemate with Fenn. Neither willing to strike first. Neither willing to back down.

"Tell me where your little beekeeper friend is. We know he's not dead, despite his wife's pathetic pleas to the contrary, and I'll let you go so that girl in the black robe can heal you." She winked, her fat cheeks dimpling. "The healers here wear black too. It's their symbol of control over death. Hopefully she can do her duty for you. Just tell me where you are hiding Connor."

"If I tell you, will you call Fenn back from his dragon form?" Bastian asked through gritted teeth. The pain was getting to him. If she didn't release him soon, he might not be able to avoid passing out. His head was already spinning.

Jayne sighed. "I suppose." She pursed her lips, making a hooting noise.

"That sounds just like the noise Nerak used to make," Tressa said.

Jayne's lips spread, baring her teeth. "Ah yes, the little owl you brought to us. Thank you. She was a very tasty meal. There's nothing like owl wings roasted over an open fire."

"You bitch," Tressa screamed. "You killed my owl!"

The scuffle of feet over brick told Bastian that Tressa was trying to get to his mother. The whizzing in the air indicated a sword. Her lack of appearance meant Jarrett was holding her back. Bastian smiled. He wasn't woozy enough yet to not understand what was happening behind him.

"It's just a little signal we developed. The owl had a quite a unique little trill to it. No one ever suspects it's us." Jayne looked up at Fenn. "I suggest you call off your dragon, too," she said, "or this is likely to end with a lot of blood."

"He does as he pleases," Jarrett called. "We have little control over him."

It was true. Bastian knew better than anyone else how precarious Connor's control was. How Jarrett knew was beyond his understanding. He looked down at the blood dripping from his arms. He wanted to shake his head, clear out the fog, but he couldn't. He was weak, so weak.

"Then Fenn will remain. He will kill your friend, and I will kill my son. Then we'll kill you, dark man. Then these two helpless little girls. We'll burn your bodies in the town square as an example. Traitors die. They burn. No one defies us. No one."

"Wanna bet?" It was Tressa's voice. Bastian would know it anywhere. But he didn't know where she was.

His mother didn't answer. There was only a strange gurgling sound. Like water bubbling over a brook. But it wasn't water. It was thicker. Smelled of copper. Everything swam in front of Bastian as she dug in deeper. His eyes rolled, and he fell to the ground.

"Get her claws out of him, quick."

A pause.

Pain.

Searing, burning pain unlike anything he'd ever felt before. A wave of nausea started in his stomach, riding up, and catching in his throat. His lips parted. A bubble popped. Warm liquid spilled over his cheeks.

"He's going into shock. Help me pull him over here. Hurry!" It was a frantic voice. "I can't heal him if we don't move faster. It hasn't been a full moon yet. Help me!" The last one was a screech. One filled with fear. Panic. Affection.

Bastian felt his body move. Not of his own volition. He was being

dragged. His head rested on a rock. Small hands moved over his arms.
Water washed over his wounds. Soft linen hugged his lacerations.

He smiled. She was helping him. Again.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 53

"*B*astian's being taken care of by that woman. Let's end this." Tressa withdrew her sword from Jayne's back. The woman thumped onto the ground, blood leaking from the wound Tressa had inflicted. Tressa spun the sword from side to side, the blood flinging off the blade. It was a little trick she'd learned from her mentor, Leo. She nudged Jarrett. "Are you with me?"

"Do I have a choice? If I said no, would you sheath your sword and walk away with me? Let the dragons fight it out?" He placed a hand on her arm. "Your people are dead."

Tressa forced her eyes away from the charred bodies. "Just the adults. The children are here. Somewhere."

"Then let's fight," Jarrett said. "We didn't start this, but we might as well do our best to finish it."

A smile spread across her face. He was brave. So handsome. She might even allow herself to truly love him someday. "Let's take down the red dragon."

"That's your father," Jarrett pulled out his sword. "Are you sure?"

"That *was* my father," she said. "I don't know what he is anymore. Connor changed, but he still fights for us. My father," she snorted, hating even calling him that, "fights for death."

Tressa didn't look at Jarrett to see if he was following. She ran toward the dragons, still circling and feigning attacks. Raising her sword over her head, Tressa struck the red dragon's foot. She twisted the sword. The dragon screeched in pain as Tressa tugged her sword out of his scales. A sticky green substance covered the blade. It wouldn't come off as easily as the blood. Tressa ran to the side, hoping the dragon would follow her. She wanted him to turn his back on Connor. Her friend could strike, and it would all be over.

But he didn't. The red dragon kept an eye on Connor, ignoring the girl under him. Tressa cursed. "Do something to distract him," she shouted to Jarrett, who had stuck his sword into the dragon's other foot. Nothing seemed to bother him enough to draw his attention.

"It's not working," Jarrett said, running to her side.

They watched as Connor's right claw slashed at her father, who sidestepped the attack. Neither had drawn first blood, or green goo, yet.

"They could do this for forever," Jarrett said. He looked up to the night sky, taking in the stars. He grabbed Tressa's arm, starting. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" She looked up at the heavens above. "Now isn't a good time for star watching, Jarrett." Then she gasped. For just a moment the stars blinked out of existence. Then they reappeared again as if nothing had happened. "What was that?"

"I don't know," Jarrett said. "I've never seen the stars simply wink out for a few breaths."

A keening rang through the sky. Low and ominous.

"Oh no," Jarrett said.

"What is it?" Tressa asked.

"Run!" Jarrett grabbed his sword, then grasped her hand with his free hand. Tugging, he urged her to follow.

She didn't hesitate. If Jarrett told her to jump off a cliff with him, she'd do it. Her trust in him had no bounds after everything they'd been through. The scream grew in intensity and pitch.

Jarrett stumbled, pulling Tressa down with him. They cowered on the ground, their hands over their ears. "What is that?" Tressa shouted.

Jarrett didn't answer. Not with words. He pointed upward, his finger trembling.

Tressa looked up and finally saw what had made the stars disappear.

Dragons. A horde of black dragons flying through the night sky, completely undetected by those on the ground. It was their natural camouflage. No one had seen them coming. Least of all Tressa's father who had changed back into a human. He took off in a run, heading for the old building. Against her better judgment, she hopped up and took off after him. Her legs ached. She'd traveled hard and far to get here. All in an effort to save a town full of people who'd just been killed.

All that remained were the children, and she wouldn't leave them behind. She would find them.

Her father disappeared into the doorway. Tressa took a deep breath and followed him in. Her heart pounded in her chest as the darkness overtook her vision. With her arms out in front of her, Tressa walked carefully, listening for any sound. A kicked pebble. The scrape of an arm against a rock wall. Anything that would alert her to her father's presence.

The silence overwhelmed her. Only the sound of her breathing tickled at her ears. Tressa stood still and closed her eyes. She'd traversed the darkness once before. She'd survived beasts, evil queens, and being dumped in the ocean to drift. She would survive this.

"My daughter." The voice, tinged with anger, echoing. "You can choose to join me. Your love lies dying outside. You have nothing

left."

So he thought she was still in love with Bastian. Someone might have been watching her, prepared for her to come to this city, but they didn't know everything.

Tressa forced a wet sniffle. "I think he's already dead."

"As my Jayne lays dead at your hands. It was a stroke of genius, you know. Attacking her from behind. It wouldn't have worked on me, but Jayne never thought far enough ahead. She was more of a follower than a leader. Not like us. You and I are of the same blood. We come from a long line of leaders." He stopped, taking a loud, deep breath. "If you come with me, if you work with me, you will reap rewards beyond any you can imagine."

Tressa remained quiet. He was a tool, guided by a strong hand. But whose? Who wanted Connor and his honey so badly that they would kidnap an entire town of people?

"Your offer intrigues me," Tressa said, allowing her voice to shake. Let him think she was still nervous. "But who would we be working for? Who do you report to?"

There was no answer. Only silence.

She cursed herself. She'd gone too far. He'd see through her ruse. Sweat dripped from her palms.

"If you join me, you will meet my masters. But only if you drink all of this. Every last drop." He snarled just in front of her face.

Tressa leapt backward. How could he move so quickly without a sound?

He snapped, the braziers coming to life again. Her father stood in front of her, dressed in a robe, holding out a cup carved from a bone. Grotesque figures writhed across the body of the cup, their mouths open in agony, eyes bugged out and fearful. "Drink this, and be my daughter again in every way."

She took the cup in shaking hands. A liquid splashed in the cup. She took a sniff, recognizing the coppery scent. Blood.

Her father smiled, his teeth filed into points. He hadn't looked like that when she'd met him in the forest. He hadn't seemed so evil then either. Now, though, he was beyond her help.

She thought of Connor. He was out there somewhere. He'd become a dragon, yet he still fought for good. The madness she'd seen in her father, Stacia, and Jacinda hadn't swallowed him. Maybe it wouldn't swallow her either.

"Drink from the cup of life, my daughter." Fenn's voiced dripped with malevolence.

Tressa looked up. Her eyes met his. Red and slitted, bloodshot and angry. If giving in would save the children, she'd take the risk.

"If I drink from this cup, will you take me to whoever controls

you?"

He laughed. "No one controls me. I fight for what I believe in. The power here is beyond anything you can imagine. You've only seen a bit of what I can offer you."

Tressa stood still, feeling her heart thud in her chest. The cup touched her bottom lip. She tilted it, a droplet of blood washing over her lips as they parted. The thick liquid ran down her throat like silk over her naked body. Luscious. Sexy. Perfection.

The cup flew out of her hand at the same time a sword cut into her father's abdomen.

Jarrett kicked her father, pushing him off his sword. He crumpled to the floor. "Did you drink any of that?" Jarrett asked. He stabbed Fenn another time in the chest, just over the heart. Fenn didn't even have a chance to fight back.

Tressa shook her head no. It had only been a little. Not enough to matter. Not enough to make her feel any different. No one needed to know.

"How did you —"

"I followed you and snuck in a window. Let's go," Jarrett said, grabbing her hand. "Connor, Elinor, Bastian, and Avital have already flown off toward the Drowned Country. The black dragons are still here. One has agreed to fly us there too."

Three women emerged from the back of the building, holding hands with the children of Hutton's Bridge. Hazel held onto a fourth woman, shuffling past Tressa and Jarrett. She offered Tressa a small smile.

Tressa followed Jarrett blindly, stumbling through the building. They emerged into the night, a black dragon with blue eyes waiting, down on one knee. Jarrett lifted Tressa on its back and mounted behind her.

"The children," she gasped, pointing to the huddled mass of dirty orphans. Hazel sat on the ground, her two boys in her lap and Bastian's daughter sleeping in front of her.

Jarrett waved to a woman with black hair, black eyes, and porcelain skin. She nodded, waving to the other dragons. They were hissing at the townspeople who cowered in fear at the edges of the square.

"Fi will make sure they're brought back with us." Jarrett said.

Fi? Who was Fi? The world swam in front of her eyes.

Hang on to its scales," he whispered in her ear. "I've got you from behind."

She nodded. She felt so strange. Maybe she'd swallowed more blood than she thought. Tressa leaned her head back, resting it on Jarrett's chest. Her heart danced in the cold night as they ascended

into the sky.

"We have to thank the gods that the black dragons showed up. I don't know how they knew or why they chose to help us now." Tressa could feel Jarrett shake his head behind her. "We thought the Black had died out. Now rest. Sleep if you can. I have you."

Tressa agreed. She needed sleep. She was suddenly and overwhelmingly exhausted.

Epilogue

Jarrett laid Tressa down on the fluffy bed in the room Elinor had shown him to. He'd carried Tressa in his arms after the black dragons left them and the children of Hutton's Bridge at the castle at Ashoom. They'd flown into the dark of the night, leaving behind only one of their kind.

Elinor had greeted them with a whisper, telling Jarrett the rest of the castle was asleep. She snuck them through the hallways to an expansive chamber.

She didn't ask if Jarrett wanted a separate room. He didn't request one. It would take an army to pull him away from Tressa now.

Tressa had slept the whole flight back. The sun was nearly rising when he finally laid her in the bed in her shift. He stretched out next to her, stroking her hair.

Tressa was beautiful. The most exquisite woman he'd ever known. Her beauty lay in the simple lines of her face. In the lofty standards she expected from people. Jarrett didn't need, nor want, obvious beauty. He didn't crave a title or a throne. He wanted the woman sleeping in front of him, but only if she would have him too.

Tressa moaned in her sleep. Her arms jerked, as if fighting an invisible enemy. Of course she would have nightmares. After everything she'd seen, he'd be surprised if she could have another peaceful night's sleep again. He had grown up with the threat of war. He knew of the dragons. He could perform the smallest of magic.

But Tressa was an innocent who'd grown up isolated from the world. None of this was common for her. It was the things nightmares were made of.

She rolled onto her back, still fighting her dreams.

"Shhhh," he whispered. "I'm here. I will protect you." He left a small peck on her ear. It was the most he would dare while she slept. He desired her, but he would only act in the moments when she desired him as well. It was dishonorable to take advantage of a woman while she slept. He didn't just honor her. He thought that perhaps he truly loved her. Not just the love of a new relationship with a woman who intrigued him, but the kind that might last for the

rest of his life.

Tressa moaned again, and her eyelids snapped open. Jarrett started to say something reassuring, then stopped, his mouth slack.

One of her eyes was the same blue it had always been.

The other was red, slitted with the black of a dragon eye.

The story continues with...

RETRIBUTION

Dragonlands, Book Three

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RETRIBUTION

by
Megg Jensen

Prologue

Life wasn't as before. Sophia no longer had the confines of a body ravaged by age. Here she could stretch in every direction without joints cracking and muscles screaming for respite. Her mind was as sharp as ever. Perhaps even more alert. She missed her dear great-granddaughter, Tressa, but she'd done what she was compelled to do.

When she was only thirteen, he'd saved her from the claws of a relentless kilrothgi in the fog and healed her wounds; she had immediately trusted him. The foolish act of a child, perhaps.

What exactly happened in those moments, she could never remember. The black-scaled dragon gazed into her eyes, his amber irises swirling like a smoldering fire, and warmth circulated through her body.

Sophia wasn't sure what she promised him. She didn't know what they did in the time she spent with him. Some days she awoke in her bed, back in her simple cottage in Hutton's Bridge. Other days she wandered through the fog in a daze, always returning safely.

After years of frustration and no answers, she instituted a yearly ritual. Three villagers were sent into the fog, tasked with finding a way out and then coming back to save the rest of them.

No one returned.

Still, Sophia knew there was a way out. She couldn't tell them, though. They wouldn't trust her if they knew she traveled the fog often—even if she didn't understand how or why it happened.

Until one day when the dragon promised her something. He would give her a gift.

The dragon, Mestifito, slithered along the cave floor. His onyx scales rattled the rocks underneath his belly. Claws, sharpened to daggers, trailed along the curves of Sophia's body. She stood still, fearful the slightest movement would result in an irreparable gash. He overpowered her, physically and emotionally.

But she did not fight him. She was too curious, too enamored with the beast who called her from her sleep, drew her safely into the fog, and always returned her to her warm bed in Hutton's Bridge.

"What is the gift you offer me?" she asked him. Her eyes trailed

over his body, so long she couldn't even see his tail hiding in the dark recesses of the cave.

Mestifito chuckled, his laugh echoing in the cave. "I expect something in return."

Despite her apprehension, Sophia planted her fists on her hips. "Then it isn't a gift. It is an exchange of goods."

"You are a clever girl."

Sophia's face reddened. She had been a girl three years ago when the fog fell. Now she was all woman. In her body, her heart, and her soul. If her parents had still been around, they would have already had her moved out of their cottage and married. "I am no girl."

"I offer you the ability to remember all. To see all. To know all." His form undulated until he was wrapped around her body.

She had nowhere to go. She wasn't sure she wanted to go anywhere. Her thoughts spun in her mind, confused and erratic.

"And from me? What do you want from me?" She hadn't forgotten his stipulation.

"I want you. For eternity." Slithering between his jagged teeth, his tongue shot out of his mouth and hovered only inches from Sophia's face.

"And just how could I promise that? I am made of flesh and blood. I will die, never to return."

"That is where you are wrong. There are ways around the laws of nature." Mestifito tightened his ring around her, his skin only a breath from hers. "If you agree, I can show you wonders you will not find elsewhere. No one can give you what I can."

Sophia thought of her village, trapped in the fog for three years now. No end in sight. "Can you help my village?"

Mestifito shook his head. "I cannot. That is a magic different from mine. I would die trying, and death isn't something I seek. I seek life." His forked tongue dragged across her cheek.

"If you can't help my people, then I can't agree to your proposal." She choked back a sob. She wanted nothing more than to say yes to anything he asked of her. Every iota of her soul fought against her mind.

"I would if I could, my dear, dear Sophia. Even a magic like mine cannot compete against what has been done to Hutton's Bridge."

"How old are you?" she asked Mestifito. He didn't seem old. Then again, he was her first dragon. She didn't know how to determine the age of one.

"Not much older than you. Twenty." He huffed.

Sophia winced, sure his dragon breath would be rank, but she was surprised by the scent of cinnamon and honey. She drew in a deep breath, his aroma creeping into her essence, becoming as much a part

of her as her own blood.

“Why me?”

“You are not like the others in the Charred Barrens. And soon we are going to dissolve into myth.”

“I—I don’t understand,” Sophia said. A trembling hand reached up to his muzzle. She’d expected his scales to be rough. Instead they were soft like feathers.

“You will someday.”

“Mestifito...”

“Yes?”

“You may have me. All of me. Forever.” She trembled, not fully understanding what she was agreeing to, but believing it was the best choice, the only choice, she could make.

Mestifito’s giant body shook from his head to his tail. His eyes rolled back, and he dropped to the ground.

“No!” Sophia fell next to his head, cradling his snout in her arms. “What’s wrong? Don’t promise me forever only to leave me.” Tears poured from her eyes, streaming down her cheeks.

Mestifito convulsed for a few moments until his body began to change. Sophia gasped and scrambled backward across the pebbled ground. Rocks bit into her palms, drawing blood. She cowered against the cave wall, her heart pounding.

His body contorted and shrank. His scaled armor turned to dark skin, so black Sophia couldn’t find him in the dark cave.

“Mestifito?” She called out into the darkness. There was no sound. Not the tiniest echo. Nothing.

Until...

A crunching sound. Feet on the ground. Tentative at first. Then faster. Running.

Sophia pressed her back into the dirt. She didn’t remember how she’d gotten into the cave, nor did she know how to get out. Fear gripped her heart, squeezing.

“Sophia?” It was a gentle voice.

She didn’t respond.

It came nearer.

“Now that you’ve finally given me your promise, you will be allowed to remember. You will know.”

A ball of light burst through the dark. Sophia threw her arm over her eyes. “Mestifito?” It was his voice, but different. Somehow softer, gentler.

Less beast.

More man.

“Drop your arm. See your future.”

Trembling, she did as she was told. A man stood in front of her.

Tall with jet black hair and amber eyes the color of fire. It was the man in her memory. "Mestifito?" she asked again. She reached out a hand to him.

By the faint light of the bauble in his hand, she could see more clearly as he came closer. His skin, as dark as hers was pale. She followed the light up his arm to his chest. His throat. His face. A strong jaw, blinding white teeth, full lips, and those beautiful amber eyes.

It was him. The dragon was a man.

"I will help you remember all of your previous visits."

She stood, her hand in his. "Did I turn you down those times?"

He shook his head. "No. Today was the first day I asked." He leaned down, pressing his lips against hers, hungry. Her fingers rested on his shoulders, exploring the finely chiseled muscles. Her heart leapt. Her body ached.

She broke away. "Women younger than I have been wed and bedded."

He traced a finger across her jaw. "I wasn't waiting for physical maturity. I was waiting for you to be prepared. What lies ahead for you is a life of lies and pain. You will know it all, Sophia. When you return to Hutton's Bridge—"

"Return?" Sophia stepped away from him. "No. I won't return. I want to stay with you."

"We have all of eternity together, my Sophia. There are things that must be done before you can stay with me forever. You will have a family. You will grow old. You will die. And only then can we be together forever." Mestifito pulled her back into his embrace.

Sophia buried her head in his chest, taking in his scent. The honey and cinnamon still lingered. There was so much she didn't understand, but she trusted him. And, more importantly, she loved her people. Yes, she would go home. She would help them to escape.

There was life beyond the fog. She knew it, and she would do what it took to free her people.

Only then could she return to Mestifito and be with him forever.

Chapter 1

Death hung over Tressa like a shroud, clouding every movement, every thought, every breath. She lay in bed, exhausted. She'd promised Jarrett she would rest. After recent events, she couldn't argue. Regret, loss, and fear overwhelmed her at times, hampering her recovery.

Since arriving back at Ashoom after the battle at Malum, Tressa hadn't felt herself. A chill surrounded her, yet there was a fire in her stomach forcing her to retch up everything she ate. Tressa wanted to ask Elinor, the girl appeared to be a very competent healer, if it had anything to do with the miscarriage she'd suffered not long ago. But Tressa hadn't found the right time to tell Bastian about the baby and it wasn't fair for anyone else to know before him.

Late at night when she woke up in tears, her arms wrapped around her belly, it was Jarrett who held her and dried her cheeks. He knew her deepest secrets and kept them without so much as a knowing glance.

Her illness also gave her a good reason to avoid Bastian. He'd visited her room, yes, but they hadn't spoken about their relationship, or lack thereof. She didn't even know what to say, how to explain the change in her feelings. It wasn't as if there was one moment when she didn't love him the way she knew she should have.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Tressa tried to sit up, but her head hurt and her stomach churned. "Come in," she said, her voice weak.

"I brought some burnt bread," Jarrett said, a tray in his hands. He kicked the door shut behind him. "Fotia was playing and hit a loaf of bread with some dragonfire. It's actually quite tasty."

Tressa offered a smile. Food wasn't her friend, though she hadn't stopped trying to eat. She couldn't live without food, so she'd keep trying until it stayed where it was supposed to. With a shaky hand, she reached out for the burnt bread. She took a small nibble and swallowed. When the nausea didn't come, she took another bite. And another.

Jarrett sat next to her on the bed. He cupped her chin in his hand

and stared her in the eyes. He'd been doing a lot of that lately. "Find what you're looking for?" she asked him, her mouth filled with breadcrumbs.

Jarrett kissed the tip of her nose. "Everything I need is right here." The concerned look on his face melted into a smile. "There is someone who wants to talk to you. And I think it's time, if you're feeling up to it."

Tressa nodded. Jarrett didn't even have to tell her who it was. Bastian. "It's fine. Do you mind leaving us alone?"

"Of course not. I was going to suggest that anyway." He ran a hand over Tressa's hair. "Just don't get yourself too worked up, okay? You're not quite back to your strong self yet."

It was an understatement. Tressa had barely felt human the last few days. The burnt bread was helping though. It didn't land in her stomach like a brick the way the rest of the food had.

Jarrett left, and a few moments later Bastian entered. He hung back at the doorway. Tressa motioned him over to the bed, patting the empty spot next to her. "Come, sit."

Bastian sat so close to the edge of the mattress that the slightest bounce would knock him off. Had she hurt him so badly? Had he really not seen the end coming or even moved on himself? It had been many moons since they were last together. She'd grown and changed. Hadn't he?

Tressa reached out for his hand. She hadn't forgotten how her hand fit neatly into his. She'd always believed they were perfectly matched, the way her fingers slipped neatly between his. Comfortable. Easy. But the spark was gone. Tressa looked up at Bastian, knowing she should say something. She didn't know how to start.

Bastian looked just as grim. He squeezed her hand. "Do you remember all those times we would hold hands in secret? Knowing we weren't supposed to, but taking the chance no one would see us?"

"We never got caught," Tressa said, a smile at the corner of her lips.

"Connor was always watching out for us," Bastian said. He glanced out the window, then back at Tressa.

Tressa knew he was thinking how much Connor had changed. How much all of them had changed. "Now that we've grown up, we have to watch out for ourselves. And we've made new friends."

"Jarrett," Bastian said. His eyes narrowed and his lips went thin.

So he didn't approve. Tressa shouldn't have been surprised. "And Elinor," Tressa softly reminded him. "I hear she's saved you twice." She watched for a glimmer in his eyes. He remained slumped, a little reluctant. If he had feelings for Elinor, Tressa couldn't see it.

"She has. She's a good woman," Bastian said. "I'm not here to

discuss Elinor with you."

Tressa nodded, waiting for the inevitable questions. Why? And when? She wished she knew the answers. She wouldn't lie to him to make him feel better.

"The last time we were together, in the forest with our parents, things were good between us. I wanted to ask if you're okay." Bastian rubbed her hand with his thumb. He took a deep breath. "All I've ever wanted is for you to be happy."

Knowing Bastian, he was probably happy he'd gotten it out without too much trouble. He was never verbose and expressing his feelings wasn't easy. Tressa knew that. She'd never been one of those women to complain about her man not communicating. It came easy to some. With Bastian, it didn't.

Tressa laughed a little. "Happy? I don't know if that's a good word to describe me now. Content? Yes. Hopeful? Yes." She coughed, a burn tickling in her chest. "As for us..." The words stuck in her throat. She wanted to tell him about the miscarriage, but one look in his green eyes told her it was a bad idea.

Why burden him with the loss of yet another baby? He'd grieved along with her when she never conceived the babies they so longed for. Now she'd not only have to tell him she'd lost another, but that she suspected Granna had been the one keeping them from getting pregnant the whole time.

No, she'd hurt him enough by breaking off their relationship. This was one thing she'd keep between herself and Jarrett.

"As for us, I'm sorry." She slipped from his grasp and wrung her hands. "If we'd stayed in Hutton's Bridge, we might have found our way back to each other. But here, in this new world, we don't make as much sense as we used to."

Bastian leaned over, kissing Tressa on the cheek. "I think I can understand that. I will accept it soon enough." He leaned into her, giving her a light hug.

Whether it was because she was sick or he was too afraid to get close, Tressa didn't object. She rubbed his back and was surprised to notice it didn't spark any kind of desire in either of them. She knew Bastian well enough to gauge his reactions. The lack of one was telling on its own.

"We can still be friends, right?" he asked her.

Tressa smiled. "Of course. Once I kick this virus, I want to see the kids and Hazel. Are they going to stay here at the castle with you? There were so many children, most of them now orphans. Who will care for them?"

"Connor, Elinor, and I were going to talk about that this afternoon. Do you think you're feeling well enough to meet with us? I'd love to

hear your opinion."

Tressa nodded. "I wouldn't miss it. I'll be there."

"Good," Bastian said. He stood up. "I'll send Jarrett back in. He's probably waiting right outside the door."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Tressa said. "But he promised to give us privacy, and Jarrett always keeps his word."

Bastian's hand settled on the doorknob. Then he turned back. "Is he good to you?"

"Yes," Tressa said, feeling a blush spread up her neck. "He is."

"That's all I need to know." Bastian opened the door and slipped out of the room.

Within a breath, Jarrett was back at her side. "Are you okay?" he asked, putting his arm around her shoulder.

Tressa nodded and held back a tear. She wasn't, but there was no good in worrying him further. She didn't know exactly what was wrong with her. Talking to Bastian felt too much like saying her goodbyes to those she had loved before she...

No. She wouldn't think about it that way. She'd find a way to beat whatever was destroying her from the inside.

Chapter 2

Jarrett helped Tressa to her feet. The gown swirled around her ankles as she attempted to steady herself on his strong arm. "I can do this," she said through gritted teeth, even though Jarrett hadn't questioned her.

She avoided his gaze, knowing it was one of concern and worry. It hadn't left him since she'd awakened after the battle at Malum. He was always looking at her eyes, as if he was studying a strange bug. It was unnerving.

They walked down the hallway, Tressa slowly placing one slippered foot in front of the other. She focused on each step. She'd worry about the other steps when their time came.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time, they arrived at the doors to the throne room. Jarrett kicked them open with a black boot.

The room hadn't changed since the last time Tressa had been in it. Except it was clean. And there were no dragons trying to kill her. In fact, there were no dragons at all. Familiar faces sat around a table.

Bastian. Connor. Elinor. There was another young woman Tressa didn't recognize. Her hair hung in stringy black clumps. Her bright blue eyes flashed nothing but kindness, echoed by the smile on her face.

"Tressa!" the girl exclaimed, jumping out of her chair. She rushed over and took Tressa's hand in hers, pumping it up and down. "I'm so excited we finally get to meet like this."

Tressa attempted a smile. Even that took more effort than it should have. "You're Fi, right?" She had vague recollections of the Black dragon that had spirited them out of Malum. Much of that night was lost in a haze. Her memories of that night were spotty at best. She remembered confronting her father, but beyond that it was only bits and pieces of events. Jarrett had confessed to killing her father, which she accepted. She knew her father had turned to evil and would never return. Besides, she had killed Bastian's mother. They all had to live with their actions.

"Yeah. Fi. That's me." The girl's black dress hung to the floor,

hiding her feet. It was almost as if she floated in a thundercloud. Fi dropped Tressa's hand. "You're still not feeling well?"

"I'm getting better," Tressa said. It was a lie. Everyone knew. The guarded expressions on their faces spoke louder than the words from their lips.

Fi's face fell as she made her way back to her seat at the table.

Tressa let Jarrett guide her to a chair. She sank onto the pillows and attempted to sit up straight. She lasted a few breaths before giving in to a slump.

"Let us know if it's too much for you," Bastian said.

"I'm fine," Tressa snapped. "Let's start. We have a lot of important things to discuss and I've been holding everyone back because of this illness."

"I've consulted a few healers," Elinor said. "They've taken a look at you while you've slept and none of them know what's wrong."

Tressa waved a hand. "I'll be over this soon enough. No more wasted time." She set her hands on the table. "Now, what's our next move?"

All eyes were focused on her. Some sad. Some sympathetic. One pair was narrowed. Connor. Though Bastian swore Connor didn't remember his past, Tressa felt he could still read her moods better than anyone. She tore away from his gaze and focused on Bastian. "Well?"

Bastian cleared his throat. "The children are in the courtyard playing with Hazel and a couple of the healers who have volunteered to help care for them. I think we should keep them here for now. Help them acclimate to their new life without their parents."

Tressa ventured a quick glance at Connor. He seemed only mildly interested, as if he didn't realize, or care, that his own children's futures were in question. Bastian was right. Connor must not remember his old life. He had loved Hazel and his children more than life itself. Perhaps he had lost more in his transformation than she'd believed.

"I think that's a sound plan," Elinor said. "Does anyone else have a better idea?"

No one answered. Tressa wished she had something to contribute. It took all of her energy just to keep her eyes open.

"But there is another matter to consider too. Maester Malachi stole my eggs," Connor said, a fierce frown on his face.

A sharp trill caught Tressa's attention. Over Connor's shoulder a little turquoise dragon pranced around the room. That must be Fotia. Jarrett had told her there was a baby dragon in their midst and that Connor protected her as if she were his own.

"I need to say something." Elinor stood. She wasn't very tall. Much

shorter than Tressa. She wondered if Elinor had pillows placed on her chair for her to sit upon. "My father..." she said, with derision, "is a greedy man. When I first suggested the arrangement to Bastian and Connor, that the healers would stand by Bastian's claim to the throne as long as we had leave to study the eggs, I never thought he would go so far as to take the eggs away."

"And what do you think he'll do with them?" Bastian asked.

"It doesn't matter." Connor pounded a fist on the table. "I want the eggs back. My own offspring is among that passel."

"I know, I know." Elinor's lower lip quivered. "I never thought he'd take it this far. Did you see what they did to me?"

Tressa raised an eyebrow and looked at Jarrett. He shrugged, also lost.

"Elinor was nearly tortured to death," Bastian said, his voice soft. "One of the other healers gave her his moon to heal her. Just as she did for me once before. Luckily she didn't have to do it again in Malum."

For the first time, Tressa noticed the bandages on his arms from where his mother had dug her claws into him. He hadn't just been careful of Tressa's condition when he'd visited her room. He had his own injuries to worry about.

Jarrett scratched his goatee. "Fi, are you willing to stay and help us?"

Fi nodded. Tressa spied pink streaks underneath her black hair. This girl certainly was a unique creature. Tressa wondered if Fi had been born human or dragon.

"I'm happy to help in any way I can. Although..." Fi looked at Tressa. "I think there should be another option. Back in my homeland there are healers who may be able to help Tressa. We should take her there first."

Jarrett nodded. "It's a good idea. The dragons of the Black used to be well known for their healing prowess. Before they disappeared." He chuckled. "We all thought your people were dead."

Fi's smile disappeared. "That's what we wanted everyone to think. We hid. Retreated into the bowels of the earth. Ran away like frightened children. Do you know, I hadn't even seen the sky until a few days ago?"

"How did you know to come to us?" Jarrett asked, confused.

Fi slapped her hands over her mouth and mumbled something.

The others looked at each other, perplexed. "We can't understand you," Bastian said.

Fi lowered her hands and whispered, "I was sent by my great-uncle's mate. She sees things, knows things no one else does. She said you needed help. She told me where to fly and who to look for."

"Seems too easy," Connor said, "for someone who claims they've never been outside before."

"I'm brave. That's why I was sent." Fi shrugged. She turned to Tressa. "I really think we can help you, though. I've seen this before...and I think we have a cure."

Tressa rubbed her temples. She wished she felt better. She didn't want to seek help from a bunch of dragons who were so afraid they'd hid underground for the past eighty years. At least her people in Hutton's Bridge had tried to escape the fog.

"Let Bastian, Elinor, and Connor go after the eggs," Tressa said. "I will go with Fi."

"How long will it take to heal Tressa?" Bastian asked Fi.

"It will take us less than a day to fly there." Fi counted on her fingers. "Perhaps another day or two to diagnose and heal Tressa. Then we could fly back here. Four days at the most."

Bastian ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm not sure I like this."

"We will be back as quickly as we can to help you find the eggs, Bastian. If Tressa's illness accelerates, then what hope do we have? She must be healed first. If Elinor's friends in the Healer's Guild cannot find a solution, what other choice do we have?" Fi asked.

"Do it." Bastian stood. "We will all prepare now for what lies ahead. Elinor, Connor, come with me. We need to discuss a plan of action."

Tressa marveled at Bastian's leadership. When they were younger, he'd always been content to hang back, letting her and Connor take the reins. She wasn't the only one who'd changed since leaving Hutton's Bridge behind.

She started when Jarrett laid a hand on her arm. "Let's get you back to your chambers. Fi and I will pack a few essentials and then we'll be on our way."

Tressa nodded. She didn't have much of a choice. She had to seek out greater healing. At the moment she wasn't sure she'd live to see a new moon without it.

Chapter 3

After Jarrett helped Tressa back into bed, she fell asleep quickly.

He waited, wondering if her eyes would pop open and he'd see it again. The strange eye. Red, like a dragon's, with a slash down the center of the iris. He hadn't seen it since the night they came back from Malum. Maybe he'd imagined it.

Jarrett left the room and locked the door behind him. It wasn't to keep Tressa in. It was to keep others out. He didn't know anyone in Ashoom, except his former mates in the Black Guard and he knew he couldn't trust them.

There was only one person he could begin to trust.

Jarrett made his way down the dark hall to a room not far away. He knocked once and then entered.

"Fi?" he asked, closing the door softly behind him.

"I'm here. Just packing." Her voice floated from the next room.

Jarrett laughed. "What could you be packing? You didn't bring anything."

"I have a little. Didn't you see the pack tied to my ankle while we were flying?"

He hadn't. He'd been too focused on Tressa as she passed in and out of consciousness.

"Just a few pieces of clothing. Not much more." She crumpled up a dress exactly like the one she wore and tossed it into her leather pack. "You did a good job in there."

"So did you." He sat on a chair covered in blue cotton. Everything in this castle was blue, just as much of it had been gold back in Risos. The dragons were fond of decorating in their native color. He was intrigued to see how they decorated the underground caverns in the Charred Barrens. "Did you mean what you said about coming not just to rescue us from Malum, but also to bring Tressa to the Charred Barrens?"

Fi nodded. "We knew she was in danger. Grave danger."

"But what is wrong with her, exactly?" Jarrett wrung his hands.

"I don't know." Fi tossed in one final, identical dress and cinched up the bag. "But we need to get Tressa to the caverns. She can be

healed there."

"Is she a dragon?" Jarrett asked, afraid of the answer.

"Yes." Fi's response was simple, yet the meaning behind it was anything but. She sat on the bed, her hands on her knees. "We can help her in the Ruins of Ebon. With our help, she will know herself better."

"And without it?" Jarrett asked.

"She will continue to deteriorate until she learns how to control what is inside her. Or she will die."

Jarrett punched the arm of the chair. "She only had one drop of the blood Fenn offered her. I killed him before she could drink much more. It shouldn't have affected her."

"And yet it has," Fi said. "Tressa must have already had dragon blood within her."

"Impossible." Jarrett folded his arms tightly across his chest. If he didn't, he would destroy the room with his bare hands. Not Tressa. Not this. She'd had enough to deal with since she left Hutton's Bridge.

Fi straightened her dress. "We will know more when we arrive at my home. Let's not waste any more time."

Jarrett nodded. "Come with me to my chambers. I'll pack, and you can keep Tressa company if she wakes."

Fi hefted her bag over a shoulder and followed Jarrett out of her chambers.

He stopped abruptly and turned around. "But please..."

Fi crossed her finger over her heart. "I will say nothing. We will let the healers examine her and then they can tell her what they find."

They walked in silence. Jarrett unlocked the door, letting Fi in first. She gasped. Jarrett pushed past her into the room, barely registered the sound of the door slamming behind him.

Tressa sat up in bed, tears of blood streaming down her cheeks. A set of black, leathery wings protruded from her back, her shirt torn and hanging in shreds. "What's happening to me?" she asked in a cracked voice.

Jarrett rushed to her side, but she pushed him away. He flew backward, hitting the wall. Jarrett slid to the floor, dazed, the breath knocked from his chest.

"I didn't mean to do that." Tressa's whisper tiptoed around his ears.

"I know you didn't," he said. He stood, woozy, but he didn't want Tressa to know she'd come very close to seriously injuring him.

Fi jumped on the bed and wrapped her arms around Tressa, carefully folding the wings onto themselves. "Just breathe. In and out. Keep it even."

The wings slowly began to meld into Tressa's back. It wasn't long before Jarrett didn't see them at all.

"Good. Good girl," Fi said, stroking Tressa's hair.

"Don't talk to me like I'm a puppy," Tressa said. But she didn't push Fi away. Tressa looked up at them, her eyes moving back and forth between the two of them. "You knew this was coming?"

Jarrett shook his head. Fi nodded.

"Which is it?" Tressa asked.

"We suspected it," Fi said.

"But we knew nothing for sure," Jarrett said. "It's why I think we should leave for the Charred Barrens right away. Fi believes they can help you there."

Tressa took another shuddering breath. "I don't want to be like this. If there's any chance they can help me..."

"I think we can," Fi said. She grabbed a fresh dress from the wardrobe and pulled it over Tressa's torn shirt.

Jarrett wanted to help, but he didn't know how. Helplessly, he shoved more of Tressa's clothes into a pack.

"Does everyone know?" Tressa asked.

"Just the three of us," Jarrett said. "I thought you'd prefer it this way. But if you want to tell the others before we leave, that is your choice."

"No." Tressa sank into the pillows, her hair cascading over her cheeks. "I don't want them to know. They have enough to worry about." She turned an angry eye to Fi. "But you told them I could be healed, back here, and ready to help them with the search in a few days. Is that a lie? Are we abandoning them for good?"

"It is the truth as far as I know," Fi said. "Hopefully my people can help you within just a couple days."

Tressa looked at Fi, then her gaze settled on Jarrett. "Thank you for protecting me and for offering to come with us."

Jarrett sat on the bed next to her, losing his hand in her dark hair. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be than by your side."

Tressa pulled his hand from her locks. "I don't want you to come with me."

"But—"

Tressa placed a finger on his lips. "No buts. If I find out I can't be fixed and I'm to be this strange thing—this hybrid—then I don't want you there. I want you here where you can be useful. You are of far more use helping them find the eggs than you are to me in the Charred Barrens."

Jarrett grimaced. She spoke the truth. As always. But that didn't mean he agreed. "I would rather be with you. The last time I left you in what I thought were capable hands, Jacinda put you out to sea to die."

"I won't do that," Fi interrupted eagerly.

"Can you leave us alone for a moment?" he asked Fi.

She nodded, contrite, and left the chambers.

"Tressa." Jarrett tried to hold his voice steady. "Don't do this. You don't have to go through this alone."

"I won't. Fi will be with me."

"You barely know her." Jarrett leaned over, kissing Tressa on the cheek. "And I can't bear the thought of being separated from you. Not after everything we've been through."

Tressa returned his kiss, but her stiff back told him no matter what arguments he used, he wouldn't change her mind.

"You don't have to do everything alone," he said, trying one last time. "When you left Bastian..."

"This isn't the same," Tressa said. "Are you afraid I'm running off to find a new lover? This is about my body. My life, Jarrett! I could die if I don't learn to control whatever is going on inside me. You've known dragons. Is it normal to cry blood?"

Jarrett answered quietly. "No. It is not."

"Is it normal for some parts of the body to change while other parts remain the same?"

"No."

"Then please, understand I am the only one who can fight this battle. I have to do this alone. You help the others."

Jarrett nodded, knowing he'd lost before they'd even begun to argue. Tressa's will was strong. He loved that about her. He'd just never expected to have to go up against it.

He leaned in, kissing Tressa on the lips. At first she responded only with a perfunctory peck, but as Jarrett's lips parted, his tongue drawing across her lips, she lowered her defenses. Tressa kissed him back with a hunger that seemed unusually ferocious.

He broke away. "I'll miss you."

"What will you tell the others?" she asked.

He thought of the face Bastian would make when he realized Jarrett had been pushed aside too. Still, he resolved to believe it wasn't a pattern. That Tressa really did love him. That she'd be back in his arms soon enough.

"I'll think of something. But I won't tell them the truth."

"Thank you." Tressa leaned against the headboard. "Can you tell Fi I'm ready to fly?"

Jarrett stuck his head out the door. "Come back in, Fi."

The girl with the black hair, black dress, and black slippers strode into the room. "I'll change on the balcony and meet you just outside the window."

"Thank you," Tressa said, offering a small smile to the girl who'd quickly become a friend.

In only breaths Fi was outside the window, in dragon form, stretching her wings. Jarrett lifted Tressa and carried her to the window.

"I'll be back," she whispered in his ear. "I promise."

"I believe you." Jarrett settled Tressa on Fi's back. He tied the ropes from Fi's harness around Tressa's waist.

Without a word, the two flew away, south to a land Jarrett had believed, until so recently, was one of death. He could only hope it would bring Tressa new life.

Chapter 4

Jarrett strode back into the throne room, his heart heavy. Tressa was gone. Maybe for good.

"She left?" Bastian asked.

Jarrett simply nodded, not wanting to talk about it. Bastian returned the nod. Elinor tossed him a sympathetic smile and he suddenly wished he'd waited longer before joining them. They were all probably thinking about the way Tressa had left Bastian—multiple times—before leaving him for good. Jarrett guessed they were all wondering if she was doing it to him too.

"How can I help?" Jarrett asked, sitting at the table next to Elinor. He decided to ignore their uncomfortable glances.

Bastian cleared his throat. "As I was saying, Elinor, can you fill us in on some places your father might have taken the eggs?"

"Of course." Elinor unfurled a map made of heavy vellum. She pointed to the Snake River. "It's possible he went to the cave where we originally found Connor."

Jarrett eyed the map. He wasn't overly familiar with the Drowned Country. "How did he steal the eggs?"

Connor sat up straighter in his chair. "That was my fault. I was sleeping. By the time I woke up, he'd taken all but one of the eggs. I fought back and killed all of his helpers—everyone except Malachi."

"But I've seen dragon eggs," Jarrett said. "They weigh more than any single man can lift."

"I know." Connor ran his hands through his hair, resting them on the back of his neck. "Malachi...he did some kind of magic. Created a wall of light that sucked the last egg out of the cave. I don't really know how to describe it."

"I do," Elinor said. "My father isn't just a healer. He's a mage of the highest order. He'd hoped I would follow in his footsteps, but I chose to solely be a healer. I had seen some of the things he did with his powers and I wasn't comfortable with them. To me, they felt almost evil."

"Almost?" Bastian asked with a snort.

"Okay," Elinor said. "Definitely evil." She shrugged, her blond curls

falling over her shoulders. "He was my father. It was hard for me to admit he might be a little less than perfect."

"There aren't many mages in the Drowned Country," Jarrett said. "Where did he learn?"

"From ancient texts, I think," Elinor said. "He didn't travel anywhere. When I was growing up, he was always around. Too much. He's self-taught."

"Impressive," Jarrett said. He kept his hands clasped together. No one at the table knew he could use magic, even if it was a little. He'd only told Tressa. "In any case, we might as well face the truth. Malachi could have opened a portal to just about anywhere," Jarrett concluded.

"So where do we start?" Bastian asked.

Jarrett tapped his knees with his thumbs. "I might know a way to figure out where he went. Can you take us to the place he opened the portal, Connor?"

Connor nodded and motioned for them to follow. "Fotia, come with me." The little dragon scuttled across the floor, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth.

"She's so cute," Elinor said, admiring the little dragon.

Fotia hooted in response.

"She said thank you," Jarrett told Elinor.

Elinor's eyelids snapped all the way open. "You can understand her?"

Jarrett nodded. He'd been around Jacinda's boys when they were young. He'd learned to read their emotions. "To a certain extent. It's not a direct translation. She's pleased and she appreciates you noticing her."

Connor patted Fotia on the head. As they walked toward the entrance to the tunnels below the castle, he asked Jarrett, "When will she learn to turn to a human? Assuming she will at all? I don't really know how any of this works."

"Sometime around her twelfth birthday, she will experience her first change. It can be very jarring for some dragons. For others, it comes much easier. You have a few years before you have to worry about it though. Until then, keep her happy and fed."

"Will she remember the things we do and say around her before she turns the first time? Will she have the same memories a human child would have?" Connor asked, as they descended down a long staircase. Bastian walked in front with a torch while Elinor brought up the rear with a second torch.

"Yes, she will. Fotia will know who cared for her." Jarrett appreciated Connor's interest. Connor was a good father. Jacinda, Queen of the Yellow, had ignored her boys for years. When they first

turned, they had little interest in her, preferring the nursemaids who'd tended to them in their early years. Jarrett felt it was a shame and damaged their relationships. While the older son, Destrian, served his mother faithfully, Jarrett knew it was only because he would inherit the throne. Henry had never been interested in pleasing his mother. They had been strangers to one another, which was evident in Jacinda's lack of concern when she learned her youngest son had perished at the hands of Stacia, the Blue dragon ruling the Drowned Country. "She will know if she was loved or if she was ignored. Just like any child, she is very aware of what is going on around her, even if she unable to fully express it until she gets older."

"Interesting," Connor said. He reached down, patting Fotia on the head again. "She's a sweet little thing. I'm lucky to rear her."

"You are a good man, Connor." Jarrett could see why Connor had been Tressa's best friend growing up. He saw the pain in her eyes when she looked at Connor, wishing her friend was back. The man Tressa had known before his transformation was still in there somewhere, even if he didn't possess the same memories. Perhaps once Tressa was well, the two could reconcile and spend more time together. Jarrett felt it would be good for both of them.

When they reached the bottom of the rough-hewn staircase, Connor pushed ahead of Bastian. He jogged down the hall, the rest of them following at a close clip.

Bastian slowed near a doorway, but looked surprised when Connor kept going. "Isn't it over here?" Bastian asked Connor. But Connor ignored him and continued on.

They entered another large cavern, similar to the one at the base of the stairs. Connor ran even faster, coming to the edge of the cavern. He pointed to a solid rock wall. "Here. It was here."

Jarrett strode to the place Connor indicated. He rubbed his hands together and closed his eyes. Reaching deep inside himself, he drew from his well of magic. He took in a deep breath. Letting it out, he felt the magic rise within him. He clapped his hands together once, then slowly drew them apart, letting the magic pulse and grow between his palms.

It was a feeling he both loved and dreaded, one he used only when necessary. This was the third time in as many moons. More than he'd used in the last five years. But it was more and more necessary. And now three more people knew what he could do.

His eyelids snapped open and the magic raced out of his body and into the air. Reds and blues and greens spiraled around the spot Connor had indicated. Yes, Malachi had used magic here. Jarrett closed his eyes again, seeing what no one else could see.

The cavern swirled, jagged edges of memories lodged in the stale

air. He could see it all. Feel it. Malachi looking over his shoulder. The screams of the men Connor was devouring nearby. The crunch of bones snapping as the dragon's jaws reduced them to mere scraps.

Malachi had mumbled words under his breath, waving his hands in the air. He was a powerful mage. Jarrett could taste the mage's power on his tongue. It swept over him like a black shroud over a corpse.

Malachi had used his magic to lift the heavy egg. He stepped into the shimmering, magical opening. Jarrett strained, squinting to see what was on the other side. Anything that marked the place Malachi had chosen to take the eggs.

Jarrett's stomach dropped to his feet when he saw the statue through the portal. "No," he said, in shock. He lost his concentration and his magic quickly receded into the secret well inside him.

"Jarrett!" Elinor laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay? What did you see?"

Jarrett struggled to remain standing; his legs shook. Malachi had gone to a place none were allowed to venture. All residents of the Dragonlands, even the dragons, steered clear of it. It was an isle of death. An isle of no return.

"He went to the Isle of Repose." Jarrett look at Elinor. The horror in her eyes told him she knew why he was so concerned.

Elinor's hands fluttered to her mouth. "We cannot follow him there."

Bastian stepped up, Connor next to him. "We don't have a choice. It's just an island. Why would anyone be afraid of it?" Bastian asked.

"You don't know, Bastian," Elinor said. "Only death awaits there."

"It doesn't matter. We must go," Connor said. "I will face anything to save my children."

"Will you look death in the eye?" Jarrett asked him, knowing the answer already. They were going whether he liked it or not.

Chapter 5

Tressa didn't fight the wind blowing through her hair. It caressed her face like Granna did when Tressa was little and sick. A gentle touch on her cheek. A light kiss on her forehead. The winds in the south weren't violent or harsh as they were in the west. They were warm. Inviting.

Despite the changes her body was going through, Tressa felt relaxed for the first time in a long time. Fi had promised help, and Tressa would take the Black dragon at her word. Even though they'd only known each other a short time, Tressa felt like she knew Fi. Maybe it was the openness in her eyes or the unfaltering tenor of her voice. Tressa had been leery of new people since leaving Hutton's Bridge. Fi was nothing like all of the others.

Either she was who she said, or she was the most conniving of all.

After nearly a day of flying, Fi coasted over a dead forest. Tightly gnarled trees were scattered across the parched ground. Unlike the Meadowlands to the north, here there were no animals bounding below. Death reigned supreme. No wonder the other realms believed the Black dragons were all gone. No one could survive in this befouled land.

Dipping down between the trees, Fi landed on the cracked earth. Tressa slid off Fi's back, her boots hitting the ground. She slumped to her bottom, woozy from the sudden change in altitude. Her ears popped and her eyes watered. She had hoped resting on Fi's back all day might restore some of her strength. Unfortunately she felt as weak as she had when she woke that morning.

In a puff of smoke, Fi stood before Tressa naked, the pack tied to her ankle. "Just give me a few breaths and I'll have my clothes on." Fi tossed Tressa a wink and pulled a black dress out of her bag.

Tressa wanted to see if there was any indication of Fi's wings on her back or if she sweat blood. Anything to make Tressa feel less strange and less alone. Instead, she looked at the ground, not wanting to stare.

"You can look now," Fi said. "Changing clothes is a learned skill. Usually I can change much faster, but I'm exhausted. I've pushed

myself hard the last few days. Now, come. Soon we'll know exactly what's wrong with you. You'll figure out how to fix it, and whatever the solution is you'll learn to live with it." Fi held out a hand to Tressa.

She took Fi's outstretched hand, letting the dark-haired girl pull her to her feet. Tressa wobbled a bit, finding her footing. "How far do we have to walk?"

"Not far." Fi pointed between two of the trees. "See that cave opening?"

Tressa nodded.

"That leads to our home underground."

"I can see why everyone thinks your people are dead." Tressa ran a hand over the bark on a tree they passed. "There's no water. No crops. How do you survive out here?"

"You might be surprised when you see what the Charred Barrens looks like underground."

The two walked in silence toward a cave opening. "This is The Mouth," Fi said when they arrived, sweeping an arm out to the side.

The great maw was shrouded in shadow, threatening to swallow them.

"Hold my hand," Fi said. "It's about to get very dark. If you don't know where you're going, you'll get lost."

Tressa took a deep breath, letting the darkness envelop her.

"Only a few more steps, Tressa. I promise." Fi squeezed her hand twice. "We can't light a torch quite yet. Someone could see from the sky. Occasionally the other realms send scouts to see if we are truly gone. It's an illusion we want to maintain."

Tressa looked to her right. Fi's eyes glowed in the dark. A bright sapphire. "Your eyes!" Tressa said. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"It helps me see in the dark," Fi said. "Usually when I'm in human form, I let my human eyes show. When I'm in the dark, it's easy to give in to a slight change so I can see better."

"Were you born human or dragon?" Tressa asked. "I mean, if it's not too personal to ask."

"Not at all. I was born a dragon. I am the great-niece of the highest-ranking dragon in the Charred Barrens. My father was born a dragon. Yet, there are many, many humans living underground with us. We feed them. Protect them from harm. It's very peaceful. I think you'll like it here. Now close your eyes for a second. The light from the flame can be jarring."

Tressa did as she was told. She could still see the warm orange glow through her closed eyelids. Slowly she opened her eyes to the light in the cave. Her hand slipped out of Fi's, and Tressa ran her fingers along the cave wall.

Pictographs dotted the walls. Dragons stood with men against giant beasts she didn't recognize, the beasts slashed with red. Further on the dragons and men stood in triumph. "It's beautiful. Who drew these?"

"Once, long ago, the dragons stood as equals with man. We protected them and they worked in harmony with us."

"But all of the realms are ruled by dragons." Tressa thought of Jacinda, Queen of the Yellow in Risos. Of Stacia, the Queen of the Blue, whom Tressa had defeated in battle. She knew the Red Queen ruled over the north. Another likely ruled in the Meadowlands.

"It wasn't always that way." Fi motioned for Tressa to follow her deeper into the cave. "Some realms were ruled by men. Some by dragons. Sometimes they shared the throne. That was the case here for a very long time. My great-uncle was elected by the people here to be their ruler. He did not take the throne by force, as has been the case with the other realms."

Tressa followed Fi's light through the caves. Strangely, she felt her energy returning. As if the caves themselves were healing her.

"It's not much farther now," Fi said. "We're almost there. I do have to warn you, though. People will be expecting you. We are a friendly realm. No one fears another, so people will not hesitate to approach you."

"As long as they welcome me and don't fear me..." Tressa said, thinking of her bloody tears and partial wings.

Fi laughed. "They won't. Trust me." She stopped just outside an opening in the rocky walls. "Ready?"

Tressa nodded. She wasn't, but there was no point in putting it off any longer. Balling her fists, she followed Fi into the cavern.

Chapter 6

Tressa stood on a precipice. Her eyes grew wide. Below her was a city. Buildings, some more than ten levels tall, sprouted from the ground. Streets were filled with vendors and customers going about their daily business. Children played in a green park, their mothers watching over them. Beyond the small city she could see farmland, cattle grazing and pigs rooting.

"What?" It was the best she could formulate.

Fi grinned. "I told you we had a whole community down here. You didn't believe me."

"I did," Tressa said, "but on this scale? I hadn't thought it possible underground."

"This is a large cave system. You're looking at the largest portion."

"You mean there's more?" Tressa asked. How could there be? This chamber alone was bigger than Hutton's Bridge. Her town had hundreds of villagers. There had to be thousands here.

"Oh yes. This is just the first cavern. There are ten beyond this place."

"Ten?" Tressa knew she sounded like a bird that repeated its master's words. Still, she couldn't manage to formulate a more intelligent thought.

"We are headed to the third. It is my home. It's where the healers will see you, and hopefully figure out a quick solution to your problem. Let's keep moving. You may be feeling a bit better, but I have no doubt you will quickly tire out again."

They walked away from the overlook, continuing down the path. Fi stopped at a fork in the passageway. Three openings stood in front of them. Fi banked to the right. "You didn't feel sick to your stomach riding on me, right?"

"No. I was okay. Why?" Tressa asked.

"We have to take another little ride to my home."

"You aren't the first dragon I've ridden. I'll be okay doing it again."

Fi shook her head. "No, you're not riding on me this time. We're going in this." Fi cocked her fingers, and Tressa followed her through an opening. A small wooden cart with four wheels sat on two iron

rails, which snaked over the ground and disappeared around a corner. "I don't understand."

Fi climbed into the cart. "We sit in this. Then I pull this lever." She pointed to a bar on the side of the cart. "Then the fun starts. Join me."

Tressa shrugged and clambered into the cart. So they were going to ride in a little cart. It didn't seem scary. "What will pull us? An animal of some kind?"

"No," Fi said, a toothy smile on her face. "We're going to hang on as tightly as we can while the cart rolls down the rails."

"Down?" Tressa asked, gulping. She'd seen how tall the buildings stood. Fi said there were ten more caverns. They couldn't be lower than the city she saw.

"Yes, down. It's gradual, though. It's not as if we're diving off the top of a cliff. These carts work well most of the time."

"Most of the time?" Tressa's heart thumped.

But Fi didn't answer. She yanked on the lever and the wheels began to roll. "Hang on tight!" She gripped the sides of the cart.

Tressa mirrored Fi, her knuckles white as the cart tipped down, picking up speed with each breath. She wanted to ask Fi how long it would take, but the air whizzing by them stretched her lips thin.

Instead, she closed her eyes. But that was even worse, not being able to adjust for the turns or dips. Her stomach heaved and Tressa opened her eyes again. The cart dipped down, then slowed, moving across a level surface. "That wasn't so bad," she lied.

"Good, because we've just started. Hold on, Tressa!"

The cart picked up speed. Wind rammed down Tressa's throat. She leaned forward, ducking her head below the edge of the cart, trying to avoid some of the air stabbing at her face. Fi shrieked, her arms in the air, and Tressa squeezed her lips together, afraid she'd throw up. How anyone could find this fun was beyond her understanding. It was worse than dangling in the air, hanging from a dragon's talons. Worse than being trapped in a boat rocking in the sea. This was beyond comparison to anything she'd ever faced.

After too many agonizing breaths, the cart slowed down again. Not wanting to be fooled a second time, Tressa stayed bent over, her head resting on her knees.

"It's over. You can sit up now." Fi rubbed Tressa's back.

Tressa opened her eyes and slowly rose. The cart rested against a wooden block. The tracks disappeared up a hill behind them.

"How does it go back?" She wasn't ready to stand, knowing her knees were still too wobbly. Conversation might stall Fi, even if only for a few moments.

"I'll hook it here." She pointed to a series of ropes strung on the wall. "Then someone at the top will pull it back up to the first landing."

They'll hook it to another rope and it'll get pulled to the top. We were lucky we didn't have to call the cart ourselves. It takes forever."

"What's so wrong with stairs?" Tressa asked as she stood, her legs shaky.

"If we used stairs, we wouldn't even be at the first landing yet. It would take us a whole day to climb down here."

"How far down are we?"

Fi shrugged. "Farther than either of us can imagine. Come on. It's a long walk, but I think we can catch a ride."

Tressa grabbed Fi's arm. "I am not getting in another cart."

Fi smiled. "This is better. Much better. I promise."

They exited the cramped tunnel and entered a small room. Two guards, dressed all in black, stood with crossed lances before a doorway glittering with diamonds.

"Princess Fionette," the man on the left said.

Tressa raised an eyebrow. Princess? Fionette?

"I brought a friend home with me." Fi stood up straight, her shoulders back. Though she stood a head shorter, she stared at the guards as if they were beneath her. "Let me pass."

"Your great-uncle isn't happy with you," the guard on the right said. "Beware."

Fi smiled, relaxing a bit. "Thank you."

The two guards clanked their lances together, then parted them. The door opened on its own.

"Come on, Tressa," Fi said, slumping again, morphing back into the odd girl Tressa had met back in Ashoom.

Tressa had spent moons making her own decisions. Daring people to follow her or remain behind. For the first time she was the one following blindly. It was disconcerting, but she wasn't about to argue. The exhaustion was coming back. As was the upset stomach, though whether that was due to her illness or the ride in the cart, she wasn't sure.

Fi guided Tressa down a quiet path until they came upon a bald man with a cart on two wheels. The cart resembled a settee with a footrest. Two long poles flanked either side, the wheels underneath.

"Think you can handle riding on this for a bit?" Fi asked Tressa.

Tressa cautiously followed Fi up onto the seat. The man bowed, then picked up the two poles, and ran down the street. Tressa meant to watch the buildings go by, to see the different taverns and the people exiting them. She wanted to absorb every moment in this wondrous place, but exhaustion screamed for her attention. She closed her eyes, letting the unfamiliar sounds wash over her.

Fi tapped Tressa on the shoulder. "You won't want to miss this view. Trust me. You'll only appreciate it the first time."

Tressa lazily opened her eyes. Ahead of them lay the most magnificent palace she'd ever seen. Tall ebony towers veined with periwinkle. Golden columns flanked an iron gate carved with images of dragons in flight, in battle, and at rest. Whereas the gems at Jacinda's castle in the Sands had felt gaudy, here the firelight bouncing off the embedded diamonds was warm and calming.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Tressa said as the cart drew closer.

The gates opened. The bearer pulled them into the courtyard and up a ramp to a set of closed doors. He laid the poles on the ground. Fi jumped off the settee, grabbing her pack and Tressa's from the storage compartment behind their feet.

"Are you ready?" she asked. "I'll get you a room and call for the healers. We'll have this figured out soon. I promise."

Tressa smiled at Fi's optimism. She wanted to feel it too, to believe that whatever was going on inside her could be fixed so easily. She remembered the small amount of blood she'd drunk. It wasn't enough to turn her. Her father had told her as much. He said she needed to drink the entire cupful. One drop couldn't ruin her, could it?

Chapter 7

Tressa eyed the goblet the woman held out to her. She looked at Fi, who nodded her approval.

"Trust me, this should help," Fi said, her eyes sympathetic. "It's okay. You can trust Leisa, too." She nodded to the woman holding the goblet. Leisa's long, dark hair hung to her waist, straight as sticks. She wore a crimson gown, belted with a golden braid.

"Every time I drink from a cup someone else has poured, something awful happens." Tressa thought of the tea her Granna had given to keep her from conceiving, the same tea she suspected Jacinda had used to force an abortion. Then there was her father, forcing her to drink dragon blood.

"You must drink, mistress," Leisa said. Her hands shook. "It is the only remedy."

"For what?" Tressa asked. "What is wrong with me?" Neither woman would meet her eyes. Tressa crossed her arms over her chest. "Until someone tells me what's in that cup, I won't drink a thing."

She appreciated the opulence of the bedchamber. The bed was soft and comfortable. The sheer linen curtains hung from the canopy, giving Tressa the feeling she was sitting on a cloud—not a bed leagues underground, but that was where the good feelings ended. They needed to tell her the truth.

No one made a move. The woman with the cup kept her arms outstretched. Fi stared at the door. Tressa threw dirty looks at both of them.

Finally Fi broke down. "Stay here." She waved a hand in the air. "I'll be back soon." She left the room in a huff.

Tressa smiled at Leisa. "Put the cup down. Your arms are going to ache."

"They already are," Leisa admitted. She set the cup on a table and shook out her arms. "It will help, you know."

"No, I don't know." Tressa sat on a damask upholstered chair. She rubbed her forehead. "I can't trust anyone anymore. I'm not even sure why I'm here. Jarrett felt it was the right thing to do, but how would he know?"

Leisa shrugged. "I don't know who he is, so I cannot speak to his character. Do you trust him?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation in her voice. She believed Jarrett always had her best interest at heart.

"Then believe him. We will help you here."

"Why?" Tressa asked. "You're asking me to trust you and I don't even know who you are."

She smiled. "I am the assistant to the Black Queen."

Tressa was taken aback. "The queen? What does the queen want with me?"

"The queen sent our dragons to Malum to protect you. The queen is a powerful seer. She knew you needed help, and she knew you would be coming here."

"Why me? I'm no one," Tressa said.

"Not true," a familiar voice said as the door creaked open.

Tressa's heart thundered in her chest. She turned toward the door and saw the speaker clearly. "You're dead," she stammered.

"No, my sweet Tressa, I am alive again." Granna seemed to float across the room, a black train trailing from the back of her long gown. She knelt in front of Tressa, grabbing her shaking hands.

"I saw you die. I was there." Tressa pulled her hands away. She glared at Fi, standing in the doorway. "What is this? Why are you doing this to me?"

Granna placed a soft hand on Tressa's cheek. The old woman's wrinkles had been replaced by smooth, youthful skin. "It's me. After I passed, I was resurrected and brought to my new home. You need to drink this medicine." Granna took the cup off the table, holding it out to Tressa.

"What makes you think I would drink anything you offer me?" Tressa knocked the cup over, spilling the red liquid all over the carpet. She turned to Fi. "This is why you brought me here? Because you thought she'd help me? That woman never did anything but ruin my life."

Granna stood, rejuvenated and youthful. Though her hair was still gray, her body was no longer ravaged by old age. She could have been the same age as Tressa's parents, if they were still alive. "Now, Tressa..."

"Don't!" Tressa sprang to her feet, but dizziness overtook her, and she sank back down into the chair.

"Drink this. It will help, I promise." Granna nodded to Leisa to bring a pitcher from the table. Leisa poured another cupful of the mystery liquid.

Tressa pressed her lips together.

Fi stomped over to Granna and took the cup. She lifted it to her

lips and took a long swig. She held it out to Leisa. "Fill it up again." Once the cup had been refilled, she held it out to Tressa. "Will you drink it now?"

"What is it?" Tressa demanded.

"Tell her," Fi said, glaring at Granna. "She might as well know. You've kept it from her long enough."

Tressa looked at Fi, then at Granna. "No more lies."

"I've never lied to you," Granna said.

"There is so much you haven't told her either." Fi stood next to Tressa.

This new friend was on her side. Jarrett had placed his trust in the right person.

"She's not ready," Granna said.

Fi knelt beside Tressa and squeezed her hand. "You are a dragon. You were born that way and you will forever remain one of us."

"I've been told that before," Tressa said.

Granna's eyebrows rose. "Who told you that?"

"Just some dragons up in the Meadowlands. They didn't know what they were talking about. They were only silly children. I'm not a dragon."

"Tressa, it's true," Granna said. "You were born with dragon blood in you."

"Impossible. My father only became a dragon after he left Hutton's Bridge. Not before."

"No. Your father had dragon blood in him before he entered the fog. So did your grandfather. I know because I have dragon blood flowing in my veins."

Despite her anger, Tressa laughed, like she'd laughed at the Green dragon, Margret, when she suggested Tressa was a dragon. "Is this because of the drop of blood I drank up in Malum? It wasn't enough to turn me into anything. My father, Fenn, he said I had to drink all of it to become like him. Besides, if I'm a dragon, then why haven't I ever turned into one?"

"Tressa—"

"Don't." Tressa leapt to her feet, only to be overtaken by dizziness again. "Damn it! I just want to feel better!" She struggled, swaying, trying remain standing. Fi took her arm and steadied her.

"If no one else is going to tell her, I will," Fi said. "There's blood in that cup. Blood from our king. It will fortify you and protect you. It will also kill the diseased dragon blood in your system. Your father's blood was tainted. The king's blood will heal you."

Tressa's nose wrinkled. She'd been willing to drink her father's blood with hopes it would save the children of Hutton's Bridge. Yet she balked at drinking this blood. "What will happen if I don't drink

it?"

Granna placed a hand on Tressa's shoulder. "If you do not, your father's dragon blood will continue to mingle with yours until it takes over. The blood of the Black is stronger than the Red. Drink. Red will yield to Black."

"Stop it!" Tressa clapped her hands over her ears. Her heart thudded, threatening to break through her ribs.

"I wouldn't lie to you," Granna said, her voice raised. "Tressa. Listen to me, please. Just drink the blood and all will be right again. I promise you."

Fi held out the cup to Tressa, who lowered her shaking hands. "Trust her," Fi said. "Trust us. I saved you in Malum. I helped to bring the children of Hutton's Bridge back to safety. I brought you here for healing. Please, Tressa, before you get sicker, please drink."

Tressa looked at her great-grandmother, now restored to a younger version of herself, at Fi, her new friend, and at Leisa, the loyal attendant. No one here had tried to hurt her.

She reached out, taking the cup from Fi's hands. "Okay. I will drink it. But, I swear, if I turn into some sort of evil dragon, I will kill all of you."

Granna smiled. "Now there's my Tressa."

Tressa lifted the cup to her lips and took a long drink of the blood. Unlike her father's blood, which brought up a host of destructive feelings, this blood was sweet and calming. She closed her eyes and drank the cup dry.

Chapter 8

After two long days of flying on Connor's back, Jarrett, Bastian, and Elinor landed in the tall, reedy grass of the Meadowlands next to the sea separating it from the Isle of Repose.

"Why don't we just fly there?" Bastian asked for what seemed like the thirtieth time.

Jarrett wanted Bastian to stop questioning his judgment. He knew the Dragonlands far better than Bastian could ever claim to. Bastian had grown up in an isolated town. Jarrett had traveled enough to know better. He also knew the Isle of Repose was a land of death. One did not venture into the Isle of Repose without a plan.

"The island has protections set up against dragons. It's likely if Connor flies us in, we'll all perish before we can even set foot on the ground." Jarrett squatted a few times, stretching his legs. Sitting on a dragon's back for days, with only short rest periods, was far more painful than enduring the awkward gait of a camel.

"What sorts of protections?" Elinor took off her cloak and shook it out. Bugs and feathers flew from its folds. "Maybe we can find a way around them. Obviously if my father got through, then there is a way for us to do the same."

Jarrett ran his fingers through his hair. He looked over at Connor, who had changed back into a human and was slowly pulling on a pair of pants. The sandy-haired man looked exhausted. Jarrett knew the toll the dragon form was taking on him. If Connor remained a dragon too long, he would lose more of his human side. He hadn't had a chance to pull him aside and discuss his knowledge yet. Even though it wasn't first-hand experience, Jarrett had witnessed Jacinda's struggle. The cruel, unforgiving dragon side was more and more difficult to temper with each passing year. He'd felt some responsibility to help her, but everything had changed.

And now there was Tressa to worry about—another in the long list of reasons he would do anything to end the discord in the Dragonlands.

"Jarrett?" Bastian snapped his fingers, annoyed. "How exactly are we going to reach this island with our lives intact?"

"Sorry," Jarrett said, putting all thoughts of Tressa away. She was in good hands with Fi. "First, we'll need a boat to sail over to the island. Then we'll attempt to fight our way past any barriers the Keepers might have erected."

"Keepers?" Elinor asked, surprised. "I've heard of them, but never in conjunction with the Isle of Repose. Legend says they are the most powerful of sorcerers. When the dragons grew weary of the Keepers and their mischief, the dragons banished them from the Dragonlands."

"All true," Jarrett said. He sat down on a large rock. "The Keepers were banished to the Isle of Repose. To protect themselves, they made it impossible for a dragon to ever set foot on its shores. How, we do not know. We only know that others have tried, and failed, in the past. No dragon in its right mind would attempt it now."

"Good thing I'm not in my right mind," Connor said with a grimace. He pulled a tunic over his head and straightened it at his waist. "Your father," he looked pointedly at Elinor, "stole my eggs. I want them back. Whatever Jarrett says we must do is what we will do." Connor turned back to Jarrett. "Now, you said a dragon cannot set foot on the island. Can I do so in human form?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that," Jarrett said. "Are you willing to take the risk?"

Connor nodded. "Of course. Anything to save the eggs."

"Good." Jarrett tore a strip of fabric from his cloak. "We need a boat. We should be able to purchase one at the town nearby. But I need you to wear this around your eyes, Connor."

"Why?" Bastian asked.

"The people in the Meadowlands are all capable of turning into dragons. Their young ones have developed a strange gift, unique to them. They can look into a person's eyes and tell if a dragon hides within. If they see Connor is a dragon, they will take him prisoner."

"Wait." Elinor held a hand up. "What do you mean, they're all dragons here?"

"Exactly as I said." Jarrett tossed the strip to Connor, who caught it deftly in one hand. "Someone here discovered the secret of transformation and thought it would be a good idea to turn the entire Meadowlands population into dragons."

"For war?" Bastian asked. He pumped his fists.

Jarrett held back a sigh. Was there more to the man than just his brawn? Some moments Jarrett was baffled that Tressa was ever attracted to Bastian. Then again, his past included Jacinda, so he had no right to question Tressa's interest in the redheaded oaf.

"The Meadowlands is comprised of peaceful people. None here would want to wage war on the other dragonlords. Instead, they thrive on equality. It was simply a matter of everyone having the same

ability," Jarrett explained. "Unfortunately the dragonlords of the Red and Yellow did not agree. Together they erected a border to keep the Green dragons inside the Meadowlands—and away from the other lands."

"They wanted to keep the secret?" Elinor asked.

"Yes," Jarrett said.

"So why does it matter if they know I'm a dragon?" Connor asked.

"Only a dragon can lead them out. If they realize what you are, they will surely take you prisoner until you take down the barrier," Jarrett answered.

"But I don't know how," Connor countered.

"They won't believe you," Jarrett said. "Do you want me to help you with that?"

Connor held the strip up to his eyes. Jarrett tied the ends at the back of Connor's head.

"I'll tie a rope around his wrist and lead him," Elinor said. She twirled her cape onto her shoulders and produced a rope from one of the interior pockets. "Connor, assuming they still have a Healer's Guild here, they will recognize you as my patient. We won't be questioned."

"They do have one," Jarrett said to Elinor. "I was hoping all of you would agree to the ruse."

Elinor tied the rope around Connor's waist. "I'll give small tugs so you know which way to go," she told him.

"Okay, are we ready?" Bastian asked. He shifted from one foot to the other.

"Yes," Jarrett said, hefting his pack onto his shoulder. He reached down for Elinor's, but was bumped aside by Bastian.

"I'll take it," Bastian said, snatching up her pack. He glared at Jarrett.

Jarrett shrugged, refusing to play this pissing match. "Let's go. The town isn't far. Around those trees and to the right." He set off at a quick clip, eager to keep moving. The sooner they secured a boat, the sooner they could get to the Isle of Repose. Every step took him closer to reuniting with Tressa.

Chapter 9

"*This* boat will get you back to the Sands," the merchant said.

Jarrett knew the man would be pleased with their business. Since the barrier had been erected along the Meadowlands border, the sea merchants had lost a lot of revenue. The people of the Meadowlands needed to eat, so the Red and Yellow had extended the barrier a bit into the sea, but not far enough for them to escape their homeland. Visitors were rare, a boat sale even more rare. Jarrett knew it wouldn't take much negotiation to secure the deal.

"She looks good." Jarrett meandered around the deck. He tugged on ropes and rapped on the side. It felt and sounded solid.

"I'd offer you a crew..." the man trailed off.

Jarrett clapped him on the shoulder. "I don't claim to understand what my people did to you. I wish I knew why they trapped your people here."

"It is of no concern," the merchant said with a wave of his hand. "All will change soon enough."

Jarrett raised an eyebrow, but did not question the man. Surely the people here were always trying to come up with ideas to escape or to change their circumstances. But as far as Jarrett knew, turning someone into a dragon was irreversible. Unless the Green could find a way to turn back time, there was no hope of them ever leaving their homeland.

"I would like to rent her, then," Jarrett said.

"Rent?" The merchant sputtered, his face turning red. "It is for sale. I have no use for it now. Your people put me in this predicament. The least you can do is buy the vessel instead of bringing it back to me. It is only another reminder of our captivity." The merchant crossed his arms over his chest. He stared Jarrett down with angry eyes.

Jarrett waited only a moment, then held out a hand. "Deal."

The two men shook on it. Jarrett swung his pack off his shoulder, and counted gold coins for the merchant who took them with wide eyes and shaking hands. Jarrett felt bad. He knew it was rare for anyone in the Meadowlands to make this kind of money anymore. All of their trade was done near the border and they had to take what the traders would give them. While they weren't as isolated as Hutton's Bridge had once been, they felt the sting of captivity nonetheless.

"She's all yours," the merchant said. "Take good care of her. She was once my finest crabbing ship. I cannot get out to those waters anymore. Maybe someday..." He walked away, the coins jingling in his hands.

"I didn't realize you were drowning in riches," Bastian said as they boarded the ship.

"No, but I was given enough by the queen of Risos to fund my journey to the Drowned Country. She is generous." The boat lurched away from the dock. Jarrett couldn't help notice Bastian grab the side of the boat, his face screwed up. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Bastian said, his voice garbled.

Elinor placed a hand on Bastian's arm. She offered him something from her palm and whispered. He popped it in his mouth and chewed on it, then thanked her. The interplay between the two was genuine. Sweet. Jarrett hoped they'd find happiness with each other so Bastian would stop mooning over Tressa.

Connor took off the blindfold. He stood at the prow, taking in a deep breath. The sandy-haired man walked over to Jarrett, who stood at the wheel.

"How are you feeling?" Jarrett asked Connor.

"Good," Connor said. He tossed the blindfold overboard. It skimmed along the water, finally settling into a wave's wet embrace. "I'm angry and anxious over the eggs, but physically I feel strong. Ready to fight."

Jarrett hesitated. He wanted to ask Connor about his temper, whether he was able to control it. But Jarrett wasn't sure he knew the man well enough to ask such a personal question.

"I cannot turn like you," Jarrett said, "but I have spent many years around dragons. If you have any questions, I might be able to answer them for you."

"I do have one." Connor took a deep breath. "Will I ever remember my past?"

Jarrett's shoulders fell. He looked at Connor's curious eyes, wanting so badly to give him good news. "You may not. Sometimes the transformation is too traumatic. If it's done properly and with care, the mind does not suffer. But when someone is brought to the dragon through torture, the mind may choose to block the memories." He shuffled his feet. "Tressa told me what happened to you. How Stacia flayed your skin to pieces with her braid studded with metal. Tressa swore you had died, or she and Bastian never would have left you. It would be very difficult for you to remember your past after an experience like that. That likely was Stacia's intent."

Connor's eyes clouded over. "I'm sure it was. I was not the only man she kept chained in the dungeon under the castle at Ashoom."

"If you couldn't remember your ties to the past, then you'd be less likely to fight for freedom," Jarrett said. He shook his head. He'd heard stories about Stacia's cruelty, even seen some of it up close, but hearing from a man who who'd experienced it firsthand made it all the more real. "The other men, what happened to them?"

"Dead. All of them." Connor leaned on the rail. "They were all dead before I turned into a dragon. Each dead man's body wrapped around an egg. Stacia's offspring with them. I can only assume she was breeding her own army. I'm glad I could help Tressa kill Stacia. I'm just sorry your friend Henry lost his life too."

"Henry was no friend of mine," Jarrett said. He recalled the arrogant boy who'd walked into his own death. "I was there to help him if he attempted to wrest the Blue throne from Stacia. The one person I couldn't protect him against was himself."

Silence fell over them as the waves lapped against the wooden side. Salty sprays danced in the air. Jarrett looked back at Bastian and Elinor. She sat on a bench with Bastian's head in her lap. The redhead looked unwell. Perhaps her herbs hadn't helped him as much as they'd hoped.

"I still don't remember my wife," Connor said. "Even seeing my boys back at the Blue castle didn't jog my memory. It doesn't mean I don't care for them, though. Deep down, I think part of me remembers."

"That's good," Jarrett said. He wasn't sure if it meant Connor's memories were still intact or if he was simply a man with a big heart. Regardless, hope often brought about miracles. Jarrett prayed Connor would experience such a miracle.

"How much farther is it?" Connor asked. He rested a hand above his brow and squinted toward the north. "I don't see land yet."

Jarrett pointed to a gull circling above the sails. "Those birds don't fly far from land. I wager we'll be seeing land very, very soon. And then begins the challenge of surviving whatever traps the Keepers have laid."

"And finding my eggs. Only one is mine, but I am responsible for the other ten too. They have no one but me to care for them."

"They are lucky dragons," Jarrett said with a smile.

He glanced into the sky again. A dark cloud drifted above the island. Clouds always moved from the west to the east, but this stationary cloud hung over the top of a mountain as it was anchored there by some evil force. Jarrett took a deep breath, hoping the stories of the Keepers were nothing more than legend.

Chapter 10

Tressa woke from a long sleep. She blinked a few times, wondering why there was no sunlight. Then she remembered where she was, deep under the Charred Barrens, in a place daylight could not touch.

"You're awake. How do you feel?" Fi's soft voice echoed in the dark room. Tressa couldn't see her, except for her glowing blue eyes.

Tressa stretched her arms above her head, letting her legs splay out to the side, every muscle in her body awakening. "Surprisingly good. Better than good." She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Her head didn't swim. The world didn't spin. Everything remained still, as it should.

"Is there a light in here?" Tressa asked.

Fi snapped and a brazier burst to life. "I'm glad you finally drank the blood. If we would have known the situation was so dire when we first went to rescue you in Malum, I would have brought some with me. Sophia is a true seer, but she does not see all."

"I don't want to talk about her," Tressa said.

Fi sat on the bed next to her. "We have to. There's so much you don't understand. Once you are told why she made certain choices, you will see why she had to do it."

"No one has to do anything," Tressa said. She'd made hard decisions since leaving Hutton's Bridge. There were times she could have taken the easy way out. She could have stayed with Bastian in the forest, not seeking her own chance at revenge for what she believed was Connor's brutal death at Stacia's hands. She could have left Malum without facing Fenn, leaving the children of Hutton's Bridge behind. Yet she had not. "She didn't have to poison me for years, leaving me barren."

"What if there was a good reason?" Fi pressed, not giving up. "If you'd just hear her out, maybe you'd change your mind."

Tressa stood and paced the room. Her feet felt light as she walked in a straight line. Her arms swung carelessly at her sides. Her heart beat out a familiar, steady beat. Knowing the dragon's blood worked

calmed her anxiety. So they'd been telling the truth. She was healed.

"Okay." Tressa turned to face Fi. "I'll do it. I'll talk to her."

"You won't regret it, I promise." Fi jumped off the bed. "I'll tell her you're ready to talk. While I'm gone, there's food on the table. That will help you regain even more strength. In fact, I have a feeling that soon you'll be feeling better than you've ever felt in your whole life." Fi winked, then left the room.

Tressa smiled. Fi's attitude was contagious. Tressa sat at the table, digging into the food. A bowl of butter and garlic soaked mushrooms tempted her first. She stabbed the brown cap with her dagger and popped it in her mouth. The rich juices flowed down her throat. She hadn't had sautéed mushrooms since leaving Hutton's Bridge. No one knew how to make them like Granna.

Granna. She knew all of Tressa's favorites. Boiled eggs accompanied warm bread. She took a quick sip from the cup. Honeywine. Yes, Granna had definitely had a hand in choosing the food Fi brought.

A tentative knock interrupted Tressa's meal. "Come in," she said.

The door swung open and Granna walked in, her hands buried deep in the pockets of her black cotton gown. "I'm glad to hear you're feeling better, Tressa. I'm even happier you've agreed to see me."

Tressa set down her cup. "I feel it's the right thing to do. Fi swears you had a good reason for keeping me from getting pregnant all those years. I want to hear your story and form my own opinion."

Granna sat on the chair opposite Tressa, her hands resting on the damask-covered arms. Tressa remembered Granna's hands in Hutton's Bridge. Wrinkled, veined, and spotted with brown dots. Now they were smooth and soft. She would have to get used to this new version of the old woman she'd known.

"The day after the fog fell," Granna said, "I wandered into it, wanting to lose myself forever. I wanted to die. I wasn't prepared to be the oldest in the village. How could I lead a town filled with children? But he found me in the fog and saved me from the beasts."

"He?" Tressa asked.

"Mestifito. The dragon king. Though he was not king then. He was a boy, only a bit older than me. One of the other beasts had confused me, calling out my name in the voice of my mother."

"Kilrothgi," Tressa said.

"Yes." Granna nodded. "I am sorry you also had to face them. They are hideous, deadly creatures." She poured herself a cup of honeywine and took a small sip. "Mestifito killed the kilrothgi. Then he carried me to safety outside the fog. He used a drop of his blood to heal me. You see, the kilrothgi had nearly killed me, and I hadn't bothered to fight back. I welcomed death and was on the brink of never opening

my eyes again."

Tressa had questions, but she held her tongue. She knew Granna well enough to know the woman enjoyed telling her stories and didn't appreciate interruption.

"That was the day the blood of the dragon entered my system. Mestifito used his own blood to save me. It wasn't enough to turn me. Just enough to save my life, but not to turn me. Eventually I gave birth to my children, and they did not show the mark of the dragon. The human blood had been stronger than the dragon. I had thought it died out with the first generation. I was certain with the second generation. But then you came and everything changed." Granna's hands trembled.

Tressa remembered how her hands shook the same way the day she thought Granna had died. She'd been scared. Uncertain. Tressa fought the urge to take Granna's hands in hers, to comfort her the same way she had all those moons ago.

"Why was I different?" Tressa asked.

"Your mother..." Granna's voice wavered.

"My mother died giving birth to me," Tressa said. "What about her?"

"She sacrificed her own life to give you yours." Granna placed a hand on Tressa's shoulder. "You must understand. She did not know what was going to happen. I only knew it was a possibility..."

"What was a possibility?" Tressa asked.

"When a dragon gives birth to a dragon, it is done so via egg. But when a human is pregnant with a dragon it is not so simple."

"How does it happen?" Tressa asked through gritted teeth.

"The dragon cannot fit through the birth canal. It must be taken through a cut in the stomach."

"I have heard of this. Adam performed that procedure on a couple of the women in Hutton's Bridge. They lived. Why did my mother die?" Tressa asked, not certain she truly wanted to know the answer.

"Your mother came to me when labor began. She was feeling ill, which is not uncommon. I laid her down on my bed so I could examine her. It was when I lifted her dressing gown that I saw what I had thought I would never see. Scratches on her abdomen, just above her navel, but below her breasts. Long rows of scratches. Except these did not come from the outside. They were pink bulges, tinged with red. Dried blood crusted the edges." Granna's eyes dripped with sympathy. "It was you, trying to get free of the womb."

Tressa gasped. Of all the stories Granna had told her, this was one she'd never heard before. One she wasn't sure she wanted to hear now. But she kept silent.

"I would have called for the physic, but I knew he would discover

the truth. So I cut into your mother myself. I did it to free you."

"And my mother?" Tears gathered at the corners of Tressa's eyes.

"I pulled you out of her. She asked to hold you, so I rested you on her chest. You appeared fully human, except your eyes were red. Slitted like the dragon. Your hands were claws." Granna paused, taking a deep breath.

Trouble rumbled in Tressa's stomach. "What about my mother?"

"She saw your eyes and your hands. She screamed." Granna's hands covered her face, but Tressa could still see her tears streaming, breaking through the barrier. "I was able to soothe the dragon in you. I helped that side of you stay hidden until you instinctively learned to control it yourself."

"Did the sight of me send her into shock? Did that kill her?" Tressa held her breath, waiting for the answer.

"No," Granna said, slumping over, hands on her knees and tears falling onto her lap. "I killed her to protect your secret."

Tressa jumped out of her chair and headed for the door, her heart pounding.

"Wait, don't go," Granna pleaded. "There's more. You must let me finish. Please."

Tressa's hand rested on the doorknob. She could leave. Fi would take her out of the Ruins of Ebon if she asked. Tressa had no fear they would trap her here as they had in Risos.

"If you still hate me when I'm done, then you may leave and I won't try to stop you," Granna said. "I won't hurt you. No one here will lay a hand on you. You have nothing to lose by staying and hearing me out."

Tressa's heart told her to stay. Her head screamed at her to run. Ultimately, her head gave in to her heart.

"Due to the rough pregnancy and birth your mother had a poor chance of survival. We had no magic-trained healers in our town. The villagers believed magic had gone with the fog. They quickly learned to fear what they did not understand. Tressa, if I hadn't helped your mother to die, the others would have seen how you were born. They would have killed you out of fear. And your mother would have died in the end. She was beyond saving. And you! I had to keep you from getting pregnant or you could die too! I did all of this to save you."

Granna may have ruled Hutton's Bridge with an iron fist, but she had a bigger heart than anyone Tressa had ever met. Her eyebrows furrowed. But there were lies she'd told. The broken promises. And now this.

Tressa spun around. Who was the woman in front of her? Years had seemingly been erased since her death. Yet she had the same caring blue eyes. The same arms that had held Tressa when she was

forced to give up Bastian. The same hand Tressa had held when Granna took her final breaths in her cottage back home.

"Why not just let me die?" Tressa asked. "Why save me?"

Granna's eyes drifted to her hands, folded in her lap. "Weakness. You were the dragon child I wanted for so long. You proved my connection to Mestifito was real."

"That's it?" Tressa spat back. "Because I was proof you had dragon blood in you?"

"I had to protect you. I had foreseen great changes in the Dragonlands many years before, but I didn't know who it belonged to. That dark night when you were born, I finally knew. It was you."

"The visions again," Tressa said. "Before you died you said you'd seen me leave Hutton's Bridge. You said you'd seen yourself there. That your visions told you so. But they were wrong because you died before I left. In fact, your death changed everything. Udor called off the yearly trek into the fog. He said we didn't have to leave. but a virus that was spreading into the village caused your death. We had no choice. We had to leave to look for a cure."

Granna's eyes widened. "Impossible. What killed me was no virus. I know because I made myself sick. It was not contagious."

"You did what?" Tressa's hands shook. The lies of omission piled on top of each other like stones on a cairn, stacked precariously over the remains of their relationship.

"It was time for me to leave. I took a draught that would mimic illness and death. But I took it too soon. I thought I'd be around long enough to see you leave. I can assure you, what took me wasn't the same thing that killed the other villagers. Their paranoia led them to a false conclusion." Granna patted Tressa's hands.

The explanation didn't calm her. It only fueled her anger. "But others died within the week, suffering the same symptoms as you. Though by the time Bastian fought his way back through the fog and returned to the village, the virus had died out. No one else was sickened." Tressa rubbed her chin and looked at her great-grandmother. "Does this have anything to do with the honey?"

Granna's eyes narrowed. "Why are you asking about the honey?"

So she knew something. She had to. "I know the Red was after it and that it's tied to the bees in Hutton's Bridge. If you know something, I want you to tell me. Lives have been put on the line too many times. I'm tired of not knowing why."

"I don't have answers for you, Tressa. We also know the honey is important to the Red. Mestifito has spent his life trying to discover their reasons, but he has yet to find one. There is much mystery surrounding the honey."

Tressa stood. "I don't believe you. After all the secrets and lies,

how can I believe anything you say?" She stormed out of the room, leaving Granna behind.

Chapter 11

A man stood outside her door, his heels together, toes pointed out. A sword hung from his waist.

Avital bowed. "Hello."

Tressa started, her back hitting the door. "What are you doing here?" Jarrett's brother was the last person she expected to see in the Charred Barrens. She hadn't heard anything about him since sneaking into Malum the night of the Descent Festival. In the chaos, Jarrett had lost track of his brother. He'd assured everyone Avital could take care of himself.

"I saw the Black dragons arrive during the fight. I also saw you and Jarrett fly away on one. I stole a horse and rode down to the Charred Barrens as fast as I could. For days I wandered through the dead forest, calling out Jarrett's name. One of the people found me and escorted me down here, promising the two of you would be arriving soon." Avital looked over Tressa's shoulder. "Is my brother in there?"

"No." Tressa glanced warily at the door. She didn't want to introduce her great-grandmother to Avital. Not after the fight they'd had. Tressa grabbed Avital's elbow, propelling him down the hall. "Jarrett stayed in the Drowned Country. He's helping my friends find something they lost."

"Then I will accompany you." The words were friendly, but Avital's expression wasn't. They had an uneasy relationship. When Avital was around Jarrett, he came off as jovial and carefree. But he'd decided early on Tressa was a threat to his brother, and he treated her warily as one might a potential foe.

"It's not necessary," Tressa said. "If you want, I can inquire about getting a dragon to take you back to the Sands."

Avital crossed his arms over his chest. "Perhaps I should keep an eye on you."

"Go back to your room," Tressa said with a wave of her hand. "I'll make sure someone finds you a way home." She walked away, hoping he'd stay at her door, but he followed just paces behind her. Tressa increased the clip of her stride. Avital kept pace.

Tressa stopped abruptly and spun around. "Okay." She held up a

hand.

Avital stopped, just an arm's reach away. "Yes?"

"I have to find a place to use the privy. Do you need to follow me there, too?"

"No. But I plan on waiting outside the door." Avital tapped his foot. "I don't trust you, Tressa. I told you that once. Until I know I'll be given leave to head back to the Sands, I'm going to stay close to you."

"I may be in there for a while."

"I have nothing better to do than wait for you," Avital said. "So I will be here when you emerge."

Tressa rolled her eyes and stepped into the women's bathing room, letting the door slam behind her. Through the rising steam, she saw that the large, circular pool of water with steam rising was filled with females, from toddlers to women as old as Granna had been when she died.

"Tressa!" Fi ran over, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward the edge of the pool.

All the women were dressed in the same bathing garb. Light linen wrapped around their bodies, allowing them to expose enough skin to clean without being indecent.

"You can change behind the curtain. I'll wait here." Fi smiled, her toothy grin relaxing Tressa.

She slipped behind the curtain and picked up one of the bathing gowns. Leaving her own clothes carefully on the bench, Tressa slipped on the linen. She took a deep breath, then headed out to the pool.

Fi smiled and waved, patting the seat on the bench next to her. Tressa pasted on a smile and sat.

"I'm sure you're overwhelmed," Fi said.

"It's a lot to take in," Tressa said as she slipped her feet into the warm water. Tingles ran up her legs, quickly relaxing all of her tense muscles. "How much do you know?"

"Likely everything," Fi said, running a sponge up and down her arm. "But I won't ask you to share until you're ready."

Tressa shrugged. "I may never be ready, so now is as good of a time as any."

Fi dropped the sponge on her lap and clapped her hands. "Everyone out," she called.

Tressa's hands covered her mouth, horrified. She hadn't asked for the others to be kicked out. No one seemed to mind, though. Most smiled. One even patted Tressa on the shoulder as she stepped out of the water.

"Does everyone know?" Tressa asked.

Fi nodded. "Some. Your great-grandmother is a bit of a legend around here."

After the last of the women and girls had left the bathing room, Tressa relaxed a bit more.

"Do you have any children?" Tressa asked. Even now, her mind often turned to the loss of her own child and Granna's decision to prevent her from conceiving with Bastian.

"No. I won't ever bear children. Sarah, my wife, and I would love to take in an orphan someday." Fi took a deep breath and continued. "There are so few though. It's unusual for a child to be truly alone. Here, in the Ruins of Ebon, there is nothing more important than family. It's why I helped you without a second thought. My great-uncle and your great-grandmother are mated. To me, we are family."

"I've always wanted a sister," Tressa confessed. Someone, another woman, anyone other than Granna, to stand by her.

"Then it's settled. We are sisters forever." Fi tossed Tressa a sponge. "Now clean up. I want to show you around the rest of the city." Fi stepped out of the pool and disappeared behind a curtain.

Tressa scrubbed all over her body, ridding herself of the accumulated dirt. She felt a mess. But the sponge and warm water could only erase so much. She still bore the scars of her life; those couldn't be scrubbed away.

She closed her eyes, thinking of Jarrett and missing him. She was healed now, yes. They'd saved her in the Charred Barrens, just as Fi had promised. Unfortunately, it brought on a new set of problems. Tressa knew Jarrett had been with the queen of the Sands many times. Tressa's dragon side wouldn't repulse him, of that she was sure. But would it change her? If she allowed them to teach her how to change into a dragon in order to have a safe birthing experience, would she become as cruel and unpredictable as her father? Was it the nature of the dragon?

She'd given up Bastian because her life had changed too much to still love him the way she had in Hutton's Bridge. Knowing the same thing could happen with Jarrett scared her more than all the truths she'd learned this day. She was exhausted from all of the upheaval. All she wanted was a simple, easy life. Unfortunately, nothing seemed farther out of reach.

The door to the bathing room swung open and three guards marched in, dressed in full uniform. "My lady, Fionette, we are under attack. You are needed."

Fi gasped, emerging from behind the curtain. She pulled her shirt over her head and joined the men. "Tressa," she said, "I suggest getting back to your room. Don't delay. I'll check in on you later."

Tressa cupped her hands, letting the water rinse her shaking limbs. Another battle. If Avital had followed her here, who else might have brought the battle to the city under the Charred Barrens?

Chapter 12

Tressa retreated to her room, Avital on her heels. Before he could enter, she slammed the door in his face. Granna had left. Good. She sat down on her bed, twisting her hands in her lap. Under attack? From whom?

Guilt washed over her. Everyone had thought the Black extinct until they came out of hiding to rescue Tressa and her friends in Malum. Now everyone knew they were still alive and anyone could be coming after them—though she quickly narrowed it down to two parties.

The Red and the Yellow. The Blue's only dragon was off looking for his eggs, and the Green were still trapped in the Meadowlands.

Anger wasn't far behind the guilt. Tressa stood up, stomping her feet on the floor and threw the door open. "We're going to fight," she told Avital.

He cracked a smile, the same she'd seen the day she met him. "Finally. I was beginning to think my brother had chosen a meek woman."

"Then you don't know me," Tressa said.

Together they stalked through the halls and out the castle gate where the people were gathering. Dragons filled streets. Men and women dressed in thick armor holding swords kissed loved ones goodbye. They joked with each other, grand smiles on their faces. Chests were pounded, swords clanged, and eager battle whoops carried on the still underground air.

"How will they all get out of here?" Avital asked. "The dragons cannot fit in the tunnels we took down here."

"I don't know." Tressa searched the crowd for any faces she recognized, quickly finding Fi's. Tressa called out her friend's name and waved her hands in the air.

Fi came over, a grimace on her face. "What are you doing here? You need to stay safe in your chambers."

"Don't tell me I can't fight just because of everything else I've gone through."

"Only hours ago, you were so sick you couldn't stand. It's not in

your best interest to be flying off to battle now."

"Flying? If only I knew how to change, I would fly out with the rest of you." She gazed out at the soldiers. "I want to ride. Find me a dragon."

"I will do no such thing," Fi said. Her eyebrows drew together. "If you want to fly a dragon, you will be flying on me."

"What about me?" Avital asked. "I have ridden dragons into battle before. I am well-prepared to fight with you."

Fi crossed her arms over her chest. "We were not happy when we discovered you'd snuck into the Charred Barrens, Avital. It's your people out there. We cannot trust you in battle. You must remain here. You're lucky we tolerate your presence at all." Fi nodded to a couple of nearby soldiers. "Keep an eye on him until we get back."

They flanked Avital, who shook his fist at Fi. "I am here to protect Tressa. I follow my brother's orders, not anyone else's."

"And if this comes to battle," Fi asked, "are you prepared to kill men you may know?"

"My only orders are to protect Tressa," Avital said. "I will not fight anyone unless they directly threaten her."

"I'm sorry. We cannot allow you aboveground." Fi nodded and the two guard grabbed Avital's arms. They dragged him away, struggling against their tight grip. She turned back to Tressa. "I hope this doesn't upset you."

Tressa laughed. "It doesn't. I appreciate Avital's loyalty to Jarrett, but I don't trust the man. The day I met him he promised to kill me if I ever hurt his brother. He is all smiles and jokes when they are together, but when they are apart, I don't have a good grasp on what he will do."

"Then it's settled. Do you want to ride out on me?" Fi bounced from one foot to the other. "My last assigned soldier felt I was too wild."

"Too wild?" Tressa smirked. "The first time I rode a dragon was to kill Stacia. The next time, a dragon plucked me off a camel and flew me across the desert, clutched in its talons. The couple of times I've ridden with you have been unremarkable."

"I'll have someone set you up with armor."

Tressa followed a running Fi through the crowd. Already dragons were lifting into the air.

"There isn't time," Tressa said, pointing up. "We need to go now."

"Fine, but if there is a true battle, I'm bringing you back."

"Deal." Excitement pulsed in Tressa's veins. Not only did she feel better than she had when they arrived, she felt like she could conquer the world.

Fi vaulted over the balcony, and before she could land on the ground, she morphed into her dragon form, a little pouch dangling

around her ankle holding her clothes. Tressa ran to the railing. She wasn't quite ready to repeat Fi's stunt. Instead, she waited for her friend to fly closer. Then she pulled herself onto Fi's back. Wrapping her legs around the dragon's neck, Tressa gave a little tap to let Fi know she was ready.

They ascended higher into the cave. Tressa watched the other dragons, one by one, escape through a hole in the ceiling. She hadn't noticed it before. From the ground, the entire ceiling looked like a jumble of rock. When it was Fi's turn, she spiraled up toward the hole. Tressa clung to Fi's scales, her hands throbbing.

Fi darted into the hole, and Tressa's world went dark, except for a tiny speck of light above them that grew wider with every passing second. Within only a few breaths they emerged aboveground, the sunlight stinging Tressa's eyes. She blinked repeatedly.

Fi's wings stretched as they ascended. Tressa managed a glance at the ground as it dropped away. The ruins and dead trees spread underneath them, along with countless dragons bursting out of the dead forest. She couldn't see the holes they'd emerged from. The camouflage was too clever.

In the distance, a horde of dragons flew toward them in formation, one at the center. Tressa squinted, trying to see their colors, to confirm Fi's statement to Avital about the Yellow descending down on them. Unless dragons had far sharper sight, Tressa couldn't figure out how they would know the Yellow was headed toward them. They were too far away. Tressa wished she could ask Fi, but it would have to wait until they were both in human form.

Fi circled as the rest of the Black dragons joined them in the sky. They formed a loose circle around one dragon in the middle, his wingspan double that of any of the other dragons. His eyes were redder than blood and his teeth sharper than a thousand daggers. On his back rode Granna, her gray hair flying behind her, a sword raised in the air.

Tressa could barely reconcile that warrior woman with the great-grandmother who'd rubbed her back and cared for her when Tressa was sick. She'd changed so much. Or maybe Tressa had never really known her.

The dragon horde flew closer, and finally Tressa could confirm what Fi had told her underground. It was indeed dragons from the Yellow and the lead dragon was a bright gold with black wings.

Jacinda.

The Queen of Risos.

Jarrett's former lover and the woman who'd killed Tressa's baby, before leaving her for dead, floating on the sea.

Chapter 13

Tressa was startled to observe that only two of the advancing dragons were Yellow. The first was Jacinda. The second Tressa recognized as the one that had carried her through the desert. The rest were Green, chained at the neck and pulled along behind the Yellow Queen, who landed and morphed into the woman Tressa had quickly grown to hate.

The other golden dragon also transformed into a human. He stood with his legs apart, arms crossed over his chest. His golden hair fell to his dark brown shoulders. He looked so much like Jacinda, it was obvious he was her son. Unlike his younger brother Henry who had died at the hands of the Blue dragon, Stacia, this young man appeared to be in full control of his dragon side.

Mestifito glided to the ground, and Granna slid off his back. Fi landed just behind, and Tressa dismounted. Fi and the other dragons changed into human form, except Mestifito. He remained a dragon, his nostrils snorting small bursts of fire.

Cruelty burned in the eyes of Jacinda's son. He searched the crowd and his gaze fell upon Tressa. He leaned over, whispering into his mother's ear. She, too, glared at Tressa, her lips snarling. Then Jacinda's eyes snapped back to Mestifito. She held her gown with her free hand and fell into a deep curtsy.

Mestifito snorted. A puff of smoke surrounded Jacinda and her son. Her servants waved it away. Jacinda emerged from the smoke, as regal as ever and nonplussed. Her chin jutted out, her back stiff.

"You may approach," Granna said.

"Who are you?" Jacinda demanded.

"I am Sophia, mate of Mestifito, and speaker of his words." Granna stuck her sword in the ground. "You may rise."

"I came here to speak with the King of the Black, not his concubine."

Granna slapped Jacinda, leaving a bright pink mark on her cheek. "You will burn if you speak to me that way again."

Jacinda rubbed her cheek, seething. Tressa fought the urge to run and hug Granna. Somehow she didn't think that would help the

situation.

"Anything you say," Granna continued, "can be said to me. I will pass on Mestifito's words to you."

Jacinda dipped her chin, then tugged on the chains. The Green dragons followed meekly behind her. "Once we heard the Black had risen again, my son, Destrian, and I sought out a peace offering. While you've been away, the people of the Meadowlands have taken it upon themselves to turn their entire population into dragons. Along with the Red, we raised a barrier upon the Green to keep them from spreading their blasphemy to the rest of the Dragonlands. In an effort to maintain peace, we have brought you a passel of them as a gift."

Granna laid a hand on Mestifito's head. Her eyes closed and she swayed a bit. Then her eyelids snapped open. "We will accept the dragons." Granna held out a hand. Jacinda laid the chains in Granna's hands. "I suggest you step away," Granna said to Jacinda.

Mestifito reared up on his back legs and took in a huge breath. He let it out in a burst of fire, melting the chains. Granna dropped the smoking chains to the ground.

"Fly free, friends," Granna said to the Green dragons, smiling. "You are no longer captives." The dragons soared into the sky, beating their wings and heading north without looking back.

"How dare you!" Jacinda stomped a foot. "We came here, offering you friendship and peace."

Granna's chest heaved, her gray hair rippled in the wind. "You did no such thing. You came here attempting to bribe us into an uneasy alliance. We will not be partners with you in subduing an entire kingdom. It is not our way."

"No," Jacinda said. "Your way is to hide in the dark corners of our world and only emerge when it suits you. The Black is filled with cowards."

Granna shot an arm out, blocking Fi from attacking Jacinda. Fi relented, falling back next to Tressa.

"The Black is filled with people who want to live happily in freedom. When our kin is threatened, we take action," said Granna.

"Your kin?" Jacinda's eyes flashed toward Tressa.

"Yes," Granna said, her voice dripping with rage. "I'm told you killed my great-granddaughter's unborn child and put her out to sea to die."

Jacinda's eyes widened. "Your great-granddaughter? That girl?" She pointed to Tressa with one long fingernail. "She suffered a miscarriage and ran away when her lover spurned her. I take no responsibility for her problems."

Mestifito took another deep breath, his throat rumbling.

Jacinda slapped her arms to her side. Then did it again and again

until she looked like a bird unable to take flight. "What have you done?" she screamed at Granna. "I cannot take my dragon form!" Her son imitated her, his arms flapping at his sides to no avail.

"Me?" Granna said, a smile on her face. "I have done nothing. My mage, on the other hand, he seems to have blocked your ability to transform into a dragon." Granna smiled and pointed to a man in a long, black robe just behind her. His hands were in the air, palms pointed toward Jacinda and her son.

Mestifito's chest expanded, smoke burst forth from his nostrils.

"No!" Jacinda screamed. "We cannot defend ourselves. At least allow us trial by combat! It is the fair thing to do!"

"Did you allow the unborn babe a chance to defend itself? Did you give Tressa a chance to fight back?" Granna looked back at her great-granddaughter.

Tressa couldn't read the expression on Granna's face. There was no fear, and yet there did not appear to be any anger either.

"I didn't do anything to her! I swear it. My medicine woman, she did. It was her foul, evil magic that led to Tressa's unfortunate incident."

"My incident?" Tressa said, finally speaking up. "You killed my baby. You left me to die!"

"Not me! My medicine woman!" Nervous sweat mingled with her makeup as it ran down her face.

"Yes, but by your command," Tressa said through gritted teeth. "I dare you to refute that."

"I—" Jacinda stammered. She looked to her son, but he had stepped away from her, a disgusted look on his face.

Destrian held his hands up in the air. "I knew nothing of this. I swear it to you."

Granna looked at her mage. He nodded, confirming the Yellow prince's statement.

"You know the punishment, Jacinda," Granna said.

Part of Tressa wanted to regret what was about to happen, to make amends with Jacinda before the inevitable, but she couldn't bring herself to care. All Tressa could see was the blood on Jacinda's hands. The blood of a baby whose mother hadn't even had the chance to save it.

"Death leads to death." Granna raised her sword.

"No!" Jacinda fell to her knees. She crawled on the ground, laying her head on Granna's feet. "Don't do this. Have mercy on me!"

"Did you have mercy on Tressa? I think not." Granna stepped away, leaving Jacinda on the ground, a rumped, pathetic mess.

Jacinda turned back to Destrian, her hand outstretched. He shook his head, also backing away. Wild, she looked toward Tressa. "I'm

sorry. So, so sorry for what I did to you. It was petty jealousy, nothing more. I will give you and Jarrett a palace, a place for you to relax and make love for the rest of your days. You will be supplied with servants for the countless number of children you will have. I swear all this and more will be yours. Just have mercy on me!"

Tressa stepped toward Jacinda. "You destroyed the one thing I wanted in life. You took it away from me because you are a cruel, jealous woman. You had many opportunities to change your mind, but you didn't. You murdered my baby. Face your punishment like a woman." She stepped back, falling into Fi's outstretched arms.

Mestifito's jaw dropped. Heat billowed from between his teeth, followed by a loud spurting noise, drowning out Jacinda's wails and pleas for mercy. Fire flew from his mouth, engulfing Jacinda in flames.

No one turned away. They all watched justice being served upon one who willingly chose the path of anger and jealousy. Tressa was filled with sadness and a sense of relief. The woman who'd killed her unborn baby was dead. Burned alive in a cloud of flames.

In his mercy, Mestifito made it quick. Jacinda was a pile of ashes within a few breaths.

"Take her home," Granna said to Destrian. "Show your people what happens when they use cruelty to rule rather than justice. We will not stand for it, and soon we will show the rest of the Dragonlands what it means to be free."

The young man nodded, his face passive, dusting his mother's ashes into a rag he carried in his pocket. He tied it up, then turned toward the north.

Granna waved a hand. "You may change back into your dragon now. Fly home."

Within moments Destrian transformed into the golden dragon and flew toward his home without so much as a glance back at the Black horde.

Chapter 14

Jarrett lowered the anchor, mooring the boat not far off shore. Together, Jarrett and Connor cranked the winch, lowering the dinghy to the water. Connor climbed down the rope into the boat. Bastian lowered Elinor to Connor because she wasn't shy to admit she didn't have the upper body strength to make her way down the rope without falling. Bastian followed, and then Jarrett.

Jarrett sat at the back of the dinghy, paddling. Bastian threw up over the side while Elinor rubbed his back, and Connor stuck his face into the wind, enjoying the ride. Jarrett hoped Bastian would quickly regain his legs once they hit the shore. They'd need his steel to face whatever traps the Keepers had set. Jarrett only wished he knew more magic. He always claimed he only knew basic parlor tricks, but the truth was that he'd spent most of his life chasing down anyone who could teach him. Still, he'd only practiced the magic in secret or in dire situations, not trusting his abilities to be useful.

They stepped onto shore, their feet wet. Jarrett unrolled his pants, letting them fall past his ankles.

"Now what?" Elinor asked.

"I don't know," Jarrett said. All he knew was that Malachi had brought the dragons here and they had to find them. Keeper lore wasn't well known, or even fully understood. It was possible he was taking too much of it at face value. Maybe the Keepers were just a myth.

"What's that?" Bastian asked, pointing at the sky.

Four projectiles careened through the air.

"Run!" Jarrett screamed. They took off in three different directions, Elinor holding onto Bastian's hand. Jarrett watched the projectiles change course. Something was hunting them. He swerved, and the thing swerved with him, following every step with amazing precision. Yet it didn't seem to be coming any closer to the ground.

Jarrett stopped in a crouch, his hands over his head. He had to know if it would bomb him when it had a clear shot. He waited, his eyes trained on the sky. The thing hovered in the air above him.

"It's okay," he called out to the others. "They're just watching us."

The three made their way back to his position.

"Watching us? I don't like that," Bastian said.

Elinor held tight to Bastian's hand. Jarrett couldn't help notice they were getting closer. He wished Tressa was with them. Soon, he kept reminding himself. She was in good hands with Fi. The Black had proven themselves to be allies and friends. He'd travel to the Charred Barrens as soon as he found the dragon eggs.

"I don't think they mean us any harm," Jarrett said. "Not at the moment. Let's keep walking, see if anything happens."

Together, the four walked north, away from shore and the water. The strange objects followed above, coming a little closer. A blue eye blinked inside the crystalline sphere, focused on Jarrett. The other three were the same, watching their charges.

"That's odd," Bastian said. "What is it?"

"Now that it's still and I can see it better, it's only a sentry," Elinor said. "We used them at the infirmary in Ashoom."

"Why?" Connor asked.

"To keep an eye on terminally sick patients while we slept, or ate, or took a break. They're harmless," she said. "Just simple magic."

Bastian shook his head. "There's nothing simple about magic."

"That's because you didn't grow up with it. I understand magic is very foreign to you, but trust me, sentries are nothing to worry about." Elinor smiled and squeezed Bastian's hand.

"Can they hear as well as see?" Jarrett asked Elinor, grateful for her insights on the esoteric. She was not a mage, but her father was. She had to have seen things others hadn't.

"Ours could only see," Elinor said.

"Okay. Just in case, let's keep our conversation general. No mention of our plans. Let's keep moving," Jarrett said.

"What are we looking for?" Connor asked.

"Anything," Jarrett said. "If something looks out of place or holds a clue to the whereabouts of what we seek, we need to examine it."

He tried to ignore the sentries, but they were distracting. They weren't subtle watchdogs. Clearly whoever was watching wanted them to know they weren't alone. But to what purpose?

They wandered beyond the rocky shoreline onto a grassy plain. A hill stood in the distance. All was quiet. Not even the trees made a noise as the wind passed through their leaves. It was as if silence ruled the island.

Jarrett felt a tap on his shoulder. Bastian pointed at Connor, who had squatted and was holding something in his hand. Jarrett ran to him, dropping to the ground next to Connor. He held a single shard from a dragon's egg. Blue and spotted.

Jarrett looked at Connor. He hadn't seen the eggs and needed

confirmation that this was what they were looking for. Connor nodded, concern on his face.

Jarrett stood and motioned to Bastian and Elinor. "Look for more," he said, pointing at the ground.

The group scoured the area, looking under moss and leaves, stepping carefully.

"Over here!" Connor yelled from a copse of trees. "No! Oh no!" He disappeared behind the trunks.

His wails attracted not just his friends, but also the sentries. They buzzed around in the air, all four together, heading straight toward the copse. Jarrett ran as fast as he could, arriving the same time as the sentries.

An egg sat in the middle of the ring of trees, smashed beyond recognition. A tiny dragon baby's body lay still, limbs ripped off and scattered in the leaves. Connor rocked back and forth on his heels. "No! This is my fault for not protecting them."

Elinor pushed past Jarrett, wrapping her arms around Connor. "I'm so sorry," she said, over and over. She rubbed his back. "It's okay. We'll find the rest. They'll be fine."

Connor's eyes burned. "We need to move. Now!" He locked eyes with the four sentries. "This is what we are looking for, you bastards. If you know where the rest are, show me now!"

The sentries formed a circle, their eyes darting, almost as if they were speaking a secret language. Then they buzzed around in a circle until crashing into each other. Jarrett ducked, covering his head with his arms. He glanced through the space between his arms then slowly lowered them. The four balls had merged, becoming one. It zipped off to the north.

"I'm following it," Connor said, taking off in a run.

Jarrett shrugged. "Might as well. We have no other leads."

Elinor ran next to him, her words catching in her throat. She coughed and tried again. "I want to come back and bury that baby."

"Of course," Jarrett said. He took off in a sprint, leaving her and Bastian behind. The sentries were moving too fast. Connor's agitation was growing. Jarrett recognized the tension. He'd seen it in many dragons. They tried to fight their nature, to maintain discipline over their human forms, but any form of anxiety or anger could push them past any ability to control it.

If the Keepers had killed the baby dragon, they wouldn't hesitate to do the same to Connor if he came too close. The sentries looked back at Connor and Jarrett, then sped up. Too fast. Jarrett knew they'd never keep up.

Apparently so did Connor. His arms and legs began to tremble. Jarrett thanked the gods that Connor hadn't fully mastered his dragon

form yet. Jarrett reached deep for one last burst of strength. He jumped, grabbing Connor's arms. The two tumbled onto the ground, bouncing over the dirt. Jarrett looked up. The sentries were so far gone he could barely see them in the distance. At least he knew where they were headed. To the hill.

Connor swung at Jarrett, his fist meeting Jarrett's chin with a solid blow. Jarrett hauled off, his arm like a hammer as it connected with Connor's gut.

Bastian yanked Jarrett off Connor. "What are you doing?" the redhead screamed.

"Stopping him from making a huge mistake," Jarrett said. He didn't fight against Bastian's grip. There was no point. He'd done what he'd set out to do. Connor's body wasn't shaking. The transformation had been interrupted.

Connor stood, wrapping his arms around his middle. "Let him go. If what he says is true about the Keepers and dragons, Jarrett probably just saved all of our lives."

"He was trying to change," Elinor explained.

Bastian released his grip. Jarrett shrugged his shoulders, allowing the blood to flow back into his limbs. Bastian was strong, there was no doubt in Jarrett's mind about that. He was glad they were on the same side.

"The sentries headed toward the hill. That is where we will find whoever controls them." Jarrett wiped the dirt and grass off the bottom of his boots. "We need to head there now, before darkness falls."

"Let's go." Connor held out a hand to Jarrett. "And I'm sorry. Thank you for tackling me."

"Any time." Jarrett wanted to smile, but the situation was too grim. He steeled himself for whatever lay ahead.

Chapter 15

Jarrett's feet hurt. He'd done little but fight and travel since he left his home in Risos to join the Black Guard. He couldn't remember how long it had been. He wasn't even sure if he'd missed his birthday. He could be twenty-two now and not know it. Someday he'd get home and look at one of the calendars in the great hall. When the world was quiet again.

The others didn't appear to be holding up much better. Connor's shoulders were hunched over, his hair falling in his eyes. Bastian and Elinor slogged along behind them, her cloak hanging askew, his sword dangling and bumping against his legs as he walked. They were all exhausted.

"Perhaps we should stop for the night. Let's set up camp and carry on in the morning," Jarrett suggested, walking to a thick grouping of trees. It was the most defensible place he could see.

"No." Connor stood up a little straighter and pushed his hair back. "I can't stop searching."

"What good will it be if you find the eggs, only to have to fight for them? You couldn't. Not in this state," Jarrett said.

Bastian nodded. Elinor simply sank to the ground, curling up in her cloak.

"I think we're in agreement," Bastian said. He dropped his pack and pulled out his cloak, spreading it on the ground next to Elinor. "Who wants to keep first watch?"

Jarrett knew if something attacked them in the night, it would be best for Connor and Bastian to be refreshed. Elinor was already asleep, her chest rising and falling with even breaths.

"I will." Jarrett laid his cloak on the ground and sat down, arms on his knees. The sun sank quickly, ushering in cool night air. The sky twinkled with an uncountable number of stars. The last time he'd taken a good look at the sky, the horde of Black dragons had flown in to save them in Malum. Tonight the world was calm, except for the uncertain fate that awaited them on this island.

Finding the smashed egg had not only been devastating, it was also unsettling. Who, or what, had taken the time to dismember the poor

thing? It was only a hatchling. A baby. It wouldn't have hurt anyone.

A branch snapped, breaking the quiet night. Jarrett sat still, closing his eyes and letting his sense of hearing take over. He took measured breaths, not making a sound. Another snap. Closer this time. And another.

Jarrett sprang to his feet, drawing his sword. The snaps retreated. He followed on light feet toward the sounds that drew him farther from his friends and closer to the mountain. He stopped, looking back at his friends. They were still safe. He hesitated, unsure whether he should continue to follow the sound or go back to his post.

The noise stopped. Perhaps it had been only a nocturnal animal looking for its dinner. Jarrett took one last look at the hill. He squinted. There was something halfway up. A light of some kind, flickering in the dark night. So there were inhabitants in the hill as he'd suspected.

Jarrett sheathed his sword. Tomorrow they'd venture to the hill and find out who, or what, had sent the sentries to them.

Before he could take a step back toward camp, something wrapped around his shoulders and covered his mouth. He fought, but the grip was stronger than any he'd ever experienced. Struggling only made the squeezing tighter. His chest ached as he fought for each breath. Jarrett was forced to stop struggling. Whatever held him dragged Jarrett away from the camp, his heels digging into the ground, leaving a rut.

His captor's arm was covered in black. He couldn't see the hand to know if it was human or some perverted creation like the kilrothgi. The creature said nothing. It didn't even snarl. Only its extraordinary strength made Jarrett increasingly certain it wasn't human.

Time marched on, and so did the creature, dragging Jarrett. The stars moved in the sky, and the distance from his friends grew, but otherwise nothing changed in the silent night. He'd stopped digging his heels into the ground. It was tearing at his muscles, straining them so bad he feared he wouldn't be able to walk. He forced himself to relax, and waited for his chance to escape.

Suddenly, they stopped moving.

"Stand." The voice was commanding through a rocky growl.

Jarrett did as he was told, staggering to support his own weight as it let go of him.

"Turn."

Jarrett faced something shrouded in a black cloak. The hood hid its face. Even the starlight wasn't enough to give him a glimpse.

"Follow."

Jarrett looked over his shoulder, back at the distant forest where his friends lay sleeping.

"Now or die."

Jarrett followed its stilted path into the hill through a doorway hidden by a curtain of vines. His curiosity propelled him forward even more than his fear. The creature sported a limp, dragging one foot behind it. And yet it had the strength to heave Jarrett from their camp to the hill. He marveled at the thing, eager to get a good look at it.

They stopped at another doorway. "Enter," it said.

The door swung open, a bright light spilling into the crude hallway. Jarrett blinked, adjusting to the light after so much time in the darkness.

"Come, come. I will not hurt you," a voice said inside.

Jarrett strode in, trying to look confident despite his exhaustion and trepidation. "I am—"

"I know who you are Jarrett of Risos. I have foreseen your coming."

A wrinkled old man sat in the corner on a wide expanse of pillows. Stringy hair fell from his head to his waist. His rheumy eyes glazed over as smoke billowed in front of his face. Jarrett took a deep sniff. Drougeweed. A strong hallucinogenic reserved only for the highest mages.

"Join me, Jarrett." The old man stretched out a bony arm with flesh that looked as though it might drip off, gesturing toward another set of pillows. "Have a taste of my drougeweed."

Jarrett looked back at the doorway, still guarded by the thing in the black cloak. In the light he could make out a bit of its face. Cracked stone outlined a mouth and one eye. A golem, a servant sculpted from the very rocks of the earth. Jarrett had heard of them, but never seen one. Another relic of myth.

"Are you a Keeper?" he asked the old man, settling into the pillows. The drougeweed tickled his nose, the sweet aroma intoxicating.

"I am. I have been waiting for you a very long time. I am pleased you finally set foot on my island. The others have long since passed. I am the only one left."

"Why have you been waiting for me?" Jarrett asked, his emotions mixed. He was intrigued, but at the same time a deep-seated fear took root.

"Calm yourself, or I cannot read you properly. Your thoughts cannot be a jumble." The old man pulled back his hair, showing Jarrett a head with no ears. "I cannot hear as others do. I must listen to your thoughts. Now quiet!" He reached out, slapping Jarrett hard across the cheek.

Jarrett's cheek stung. So did his pride.

"I have been waiting for you," the old man said after taking three deep breaths, "because I need a successor. You are my successor."

Jarrett's head began to spin, the sweet herb floating into his nose and permeating his body. He relaxed, even though his mind screamed at him to fight back.

"Stump," the old man said, looking at the golem. "Bring me the knives."

The golem, Stump, stalked to a table. With his massive stone hands, he grabbed two dirty, rusted knives. Dragging one foot, he made his way over to his master and handed him the knives.

The Keeper leaned in closer to Jarrett, sharpening the blades against each other. Flecks of rust flew in the air landing on Jarrett's hands. Panic filled Jarrett's chest, but his body had weakened. He'd lost the use of his arms and legs. The old man leaned in closer, brandishing a knife on each side of Jarrett's head.

"Now hold still. This will only hurt for an eternity!" Spittle flew from his lips, riding on his insane laughter, as he sliced Jarrett's ears from his pliant head.

Chapter 16

The Keeper's face swam in a haze. Red waves surrounded his toothy smile, and green goo dripped from his nostrils. Jarrett wished he'd seen that when he first walked in. He might have realized the old man wasn't just burning the drougeweed. He was snorting ground-up weed in his nostrils.

Jarrett never realized how powerful the hallucinogen could be until experiencing it for himself. The pain from losing his ears was negligible. Even more surprising, he hardly cared. In the absence of pain, he found the whole experience enlightening.

He'd always wanted to learn magic. Now he was in the presence of someone who could teach him the magic he'd been too afraid to pursue. There was nothing he wanted more.

Yet something tickled at the back of his mind. A woman. A flash of skin. Moaning. He struggled to remember but could not.

No matter. This was all he'd ever wanted.

"How do you feel?" the Keeper asked.

His lips moved, but Jarrett didn't hear the Keeper with his ears. Instead, the words formed in his mind, almost as if it were his own thought—but in the Keeper's voice.

"I feel..." He didn't know how to describe the power coursing through him.

The Keeper laughed, spittle again spraying from his lips. "Yes, it is how I once felt as well. You will come to love it here as I do. Stump will serve you faithfully after I pass on. You will protect our island and its secrets."

Secrets. Another tickling at the back of his mind. Dragons.

Dragons!

"There are dragons on the island, Keeper! We must destroy them!" Jarrett remembered the dismembered baby dragon.

"I know, my son." The Keeper patted him on the shoulder. "I, too, saw the dead dragon. My sentries showed me the body, and then I saw you. It was then I knew my successor had finally arrived. You will prove your worth to me by seeking out the rest of the dragon eggs and killing them. I will tell you where the man hides with them."

Jarrett bowed. "Thank you, Keeper. I will prove my loyalty to you by completing this task. I will bring you the bodies of the remaining dragons."

The Keeper's thin tongue licked his lips. "It's been so long since I had dragon flesh. I will await your quick return. Now, go back to your friends. Use them to fight the mage and take the dragon eggs."

"But my ears," Jarrett said. "They will know."

The Keeper closed his eyes and chanted under his breath. Jarrett felt a tingling on his head. His eyes closed, and his body relaxed.

A hand on his shoulder startled Jarrett. His eyes snapped open.

"You fell asleep," Bastian said, "but all appears to be okay. I'll take the next watch. Get some good sleep."

Jarrett looked around, confused. "Where am I?"

Bastian laughed quietly. "You really were in deep sleep. We're on the Isle of Repose. We're looking for the dragon eggs, remember?"

Jarrett's eyes searched the starlit ground. There were no footprints heading off in the direction of the hill. His hands searched his head, quickly finding his ears. He let out a long sigh of relief. It was just a dream.

Guilt poured over him. "I'm so sorry I fell asleep."

"It's okay," Bastian said, settling down next to Jarrett. "We were all exhausted. And we're fine. No one was dragged away in the dark of the night."

Jarrett let out an uncomfortable laugh. "Yeah, it appears so. Thank you." He stood, wiping the dirt off his pants.

Jarrett made his way into the copse and saw Elinor and Connor sound asleep on the ground. Jarrett spread his cloak between them and lay down. He hoped there wouldn't be any more nightmares.

* * *

"WAKE UP, JARRETT." Elinor shook his shoulder. "We need to get moving."

Jarrett sat up, shrugging off the hard night's sleep. He felt like he'd been sleeping for years, but he wasn't refreshed. Elinor handed him a piece of jerky and a hunk of bread. He ate both and washed them down with his water. He pushed the cork into the water skin and slung it over his shoulder. It was too light. They'd need to stop at the first freshwater source.

"We should head for the hill," Connor said. "See if we can find those sentries."

"No," Jarrett said, surprising everyone, including himself. "I think we should go east. I was thinking about it last night. The hill is the most obvious place to hide. Would Malachi really head there? He is

devious. We should look in the least likely place first."

Elinor nodded in agreement. "My father would hide in the last place anyone would think of first. It's a sound plan."

The weary group hiked eastward as the sun climbed into the sky. The ground showed no sign of anyone passing by, much less one man with ten dragon eggs. They stopped for a midday snack at a pond teeming with fish. Connor and Bastian caught a few, which they roasted over a small fire.

After the sun hit its zenith and began its way back to the horizon, Jarrett felt another bit of inspiration. "Over there," he said, pointing at a mass of rocks. "He's there."

Bastian looked at Jarrett, then back at the rocks. "I don't see anything."

Connor and Elinor looked at Jarrett expectantly.

"I don't know," Jarrett said, shaking his head. "Something tells me he's hiding there." He wished he knew what that mysterious something was. He'd always trusted his instincts, but this was something different, as if someone was whispering in his ear, telling him where to go.

"Let's look," Elinor said. "It can't hurt."

They drew their swords, Elinor behind them and unarmed. She was only there to heal, not to fight. By her own admission, she had no experience in fighting, nor did she want to tempt fate by trying.

Jarrett took the lead, his sword in front of him, his hands steady and sure. Calm infused his being. He rarely walked into a potential battle so filled with peace. He rounded the boulders and gasped.

Malachi lay dead on the ground, his head cracked open and his brains splattered across the green grass.

Elinor pushed past Jarrett and sank to her knees. She checked Malachi over quickly, her head shaking. "He's dead." The words choked in her throat and tears filled her eyes. "Where are the eggs?" She stood and wiped her hands on her cloak.

"We can bury him," Bastian offered, his hand on her shaking shoulders.

"No. He's a traitor, and he died as one," Elinor said with a half-hearted shrug. "He's my father. It is my decision. I say we move on and find the eggs."

Jarrett put his fingers to his lips. The others quieted down. He waved his hand to the left, motioning them to take cover next to the boulders. Jarrett tiptoed around the boulders, finding an opening to an underground cave. "Maybe they're in here. There's only one set of footprints, which look to be Malachi's. Maybe the eggs are hidden in here and whatever killed him didn't touch them."

It was a lot of guesswork, but no one could offer a better

suggestion. The group stepped forward toward the opening together. A high-pitched keening broke the silence.

"It's a baby dragon," Connor said, his eyes lighting up. "At least one of them is alive." He pushed past Jarrett and crawled into the opening.

Jarrett dropped to his knees and followed behind Connor, propelling himself with his forearms. He couldn't see farther than Connor's shoes as they descended down the dirty tunnel. Finally the ground leveled out again and they crawled forward.

They emerged into a cavern filled with light from a series of glowing braziers. Cracked eggs lay scattered all over the floor, their shells in a multitude of pieces. In the far corner of the room, the dragons played with each other, rolling and tumbling across the rocky floor.

Connor did a quick count. "They're alive! We only lost the one!" He smiled and clapped Bastian's back just as Elinor emerged from the tunnel behind him.

Jarrett watched the little dragons. He'd never seen one so young before. They were cute. Like puppies. All tongues and feet and playing in an awkward jumble. He drew his sword and walked toward them.

"What are you doing?" Bastian called from behind him.

He paid Bastian no heed and continued to make his way to the passel.

"Jarrett!" Connor called out.

Jarrett heard feet scrabbling from behind. He heard his friends' calls. Yet he continued, picking up his pace, his sword thirsty for dragon blood.

Chapter 17

Jarrett raised his sword above his head and struck down, the blade slicing through the first dragon. The head rolled off, the tongue hanging out the side. He heard the screams of rage, but he did not falter. He swung his sword again and again. Blood splattered in the air, in concert the whistle of his sword.

Flesh clung to his blade, mingling with that of another kill. Someone grabbed his arm, but he fought it off, his mind set only on one thing: slaughtering the baby dragons. His mind clouded over. His vision had only one target. The hatchlings screamed and squirmed within his reach. One coughed as if it were trying to summon dragonfire. Jarrett knew it was too young. He had no fear of reprisal. Not from the dragons. Not from the humans trying so desperately to stop him.

He raised his sword one last time, the smallest dragon cowering in the corner. It didn't even bother to fight. He took a deep breath, preparing to take the final life and complete his mission. His sword swung down, but struck something else. He blinked and saw what was in front of him.

A woman. Blond. Covered in blood. His sword sticking out of her chest. Her arm outstretched. Her mouth lips forming a plea.

Jarrett shook his head. "Gods! Elinor!"

Bastian ran to her side, taking her in his arms.

"Don't move the sword," Elinor gasped through bubbles of blood. Her arms hung limp at her sides.

Jarrett didn't have a chance to apologize. A fist met his face. Again and again and again until he couldn't open his eyelids. He lay on the ground, taking the beating, not fighting back.

Eventually the fists went away, leaving him in a bloody pulp on the floor. He listened to Bastian and Connor's choked sobs. He could hear their voices in his head.

Their grief surrounded every inch of his mind, squeezing, choking.

Then it all winked out and Jarrett found himself back in the room with the Keeper.

"You have done well, my son. You have proven your worth to me.

Soon you will be the next Keeper. You will fight to keep the dragons from our treasured island. You are the greatest champion, having slain more dragons than any of us combined. Stories will be sung about you."

Stories, Jarrett thought bitterly. Yes. Everyone would hate him throughout the Dragonlands and anywhere else in the world the stories might be carried. Bards would demonize him. Children would cower in their beds, fearing he would visit them in the dark of the night. He would become the beast the world would come together to fear.

He would be their common enemy.

Jarrett rolled over and threw up, leaving a mottled mess on the pillows.

"Stump will clean that up. Unless you'd prefer to eat it." The Keeper laughed and laughed, slapping his knee. "I am disappointed you didn't bring me back any dragon flesh. Oh well. I will have to send Stump to get the body of the man he killed. We shall feast on human flesh tonight, my son!"

Jarrett's memories, which had been so fuzzy and confused only moments ago, thrust back into clarity. Tressa. Oh gods, Tressa. What would she think of him now? He wept into the pillow, his hands balled and his nails driving into his palms. He wanted to die. He deserved to die for what he'd just done.

"Why?" he asked the Keeper, his voice hoarse.

"Why do we kill dragons?" the Keeper asked.

Jarrett nodded.

"Filthy creatures. I hate them. Therefore, I kill them if they dare to step foot on my home." The Keeper picked at his teeth with his long pinky nail. The rest were bitten down to stubs.

"That's all?" Jarrett asked, waves of sickness crashing over his stomach.

"Aren't they ugly? But their flesh tastes so good." The Keeper smacked his lips together. "Stump, go now. Collect the dead man. We shall feast tonight!"

Stump nodded and took his leave down the dark tunnel.

Jarrett struggled to sit up. "I want no part of this." Using the little strength he had left, he lunged at the Keeper. Instead of landing on the Keeper, Jarrett hung suspended in the air. He floated, his hands grasping and reaching for the little man. "What is this?"

"Magic," the Keeper said. "Something you've always wanted to learn. I will teach you. But if you kill me, you will die with me, for I hold your soul in my hand." He opened his other hand. An orb shone in his palm, beating with life, shining with goodness. "You will do as I command, and you will learn to like it."

"No," Jarrett said. He fell back to his pillows, released by the Keeper. "I will fight you."

"You will not," the Keeper said. "You do not have the strength. Soon your will to fight will fade. You will sit at my feet, lick the jam from between my toes, and beg for my love and tender guidance."

"Never," Jarrett said. He knew he didn't mean it, though. Already the change was happening. He wanted to learn. He wanted the power. He wanted to force the dragons, who had ruled over him his entire life, to bow down to him. When Jacinda would overpower him with her dragon strength, he found it arousing. Now he wanted to kill her for it. If only she would step foot on his island...

The Keeper chuckled. "Already your thoughts are bending to my will. You are uniquely suited to this life. Most would not be so," he paused, "eager."

They sat in silence for what seemed an eternity until Stump returned with Malachi's body. "Brains," it said with a stony smile.

"Thank you, my pet." The Keeper laid one of the pieces of brain between his lips and sucked. "Ah, sustenance. Would you like some?" he asked Jarrett. "I don't want to be rude."

Jarrett's stomach turned. He shook his head no, but found his hands eagerly reaching for the dead man's brains.

"They're good," the Keeper said, munching. "You'll like them."

Jarrett's hands brought the brains to his mouth. He fought against himself, his lips pursed together. *No, no, no*, he thought. His mouth opened, his tongue snaked out. His lips wrapped around the brain and pulled it into his mouth. Despite the nausea in his throat, he chewed and swallowed.

Soft.

Sweet.

Slimy.

It was the most delectable thing he'd ever tasted.

Jarrett gazed at the Keeper. "You were right. They are amazing."

"You will eat the liver, too." The Keeper took a knife and slit Malachi's chest open. His innards spilled onto the floor. "Stump, get the liver for Jarrett."

The golem reached down with his stone hands, grasping the slippery brown organ.

"The liver collects all of the vile fluids in our bodies and holds them. It's the most toxic and the most delicious part of the body. Try, try."

Stump held out the liver to Jarrett. He took it and sunk his teeth in, sucking out the insides. Human nectar dripped down his chin, landing in droplets on his clothes.

"You are mine," the Keeper hissed, a smile on his face. "You are

mine forever, and I will train you in all the magical arts. Then I will die, and you will become the new Keeper."

A woman flashed in Jarrett's mind. Dark brown hair. Sturdy build. A smile that could melt hearts. Then her eyes flickered red, slit like a dragon's. Jarrett looked up at his new master. "I will do your bidding. But, tell me, is there a way to lure dragons to the island instead of waiting for them to come to us?"

Chapter 18

Back in the Ruins of Ebon, Tressa sank down on a chair. Fi

and several other men and women Tressa hadn't yet met gathered around the table. Granna stood at the head. When everyone was seated, she too took her seat.

"We must prepare for battle. Jacinda's son, Destrian, will head home and muster an army."

Fi punched the table. "Why did you let him go? We could have ended it instead of preparing for a war with the Yellow." She shifted in her seat, clearly agitated.

The woman next to Fi put an arm around her shoulders. Fi leaned in, resting her head on the woman's shoulders. So that must be Sarah. She was beautiful, a perfect match for Fi's quirkiness.

"Sarah, do you have an opinion?" Granna asked.

"No." The woman beside Fi shook her head. "But I have a feeling you'll tell us your plan. We know you, Sophia. You don't do anything without thinking ten steps ahead."

Granna nodded, a smile on her face. Tressa knew her great-grandmother well and apparently these people did too. Granna thought years ahead of everyone else. But how much would she share with these people?

"Destrian will fly home. By the time he gets there, his fear will fade. It will be replaced by anger. He will call in his top advisors, as I have done here, and they will discuss retribution for killing their queen." Granna set her hands on the table. "Then they will realize they cannot fight us alone. They will send a messenger to the Red, asking for their help. The Red will agree because of their displeasure at our little mission in Malum to save Tressa and her friends. Together, they will descend upon us."

"It makes sense," the man to Granna's left said.

Tressa didn't know his name, or the names of anyone else at the table other than Fi and now Sarah. She had promised Fi she would listen, and not speak, as long as they let her sit there. But if no one else was going to speak, she would say her peace.

"I'm not sure the Red will help them," Tressa said, raising her hand.

"When we were in Malum, we fought with a horde of Red dragons, but they were led by a man named Fenn." She didn't feel like sharing her parentage with the rest of them. "We defeated him, but no other Red dragons came to fight with him. They allowed your dragons to extract us. Unless I'm wrong?" She wrung her hands nervously in her lap where no one could see.

"She is right," another man said, his black mustache dipping past his chin. "We had no resistance from the Red that night. It is possible the horde we faced in Malum was a rogue group. Maybe the Red won't join with the Yellow."

Others nodded in agreement. Tressa hadn't wanted to contradict her great-grandmother, but she could see the tide quickly turning in her direction. After all, she had been there. They knew she had killed Stacia, the Queen of the Blue, and been involved in the killing of the Red dragon in Malum. She had more experience than Granna.

"I have seen it, Jenfar," Granna said simply to the man with the drooping mustache. "The Red will vanquish us if we do not strike first."

"Then it is true," Fi said. She looked around the table, her gaze settling on Tressa. "Not to put your theory to shame, Tressa. It was a well-reasoned argument. But Sophia's visions have never been false. What should we do next?" she asked Granna.

Tressa wanted to tell them Granna's visions had been wrong at least once. Granna thought she'd see Tressa leave Hutton's Bridge, but she died before that vision came true. Tressa looked at the others in the room. They believed in Granna's authority. She could see it in the way their eyes focused on Granna with utter trust.

"We fly out in three days. Take that time to prepare. Say your goodbyes. Some of us will not return. Choose your riders carefully. Ensure they are trained for battle and prepared to face carnage. I don't want anyone who might be afraid." Granna counted off the objectives on her fingers, as if she'd already had a list in mind. And perhaps she had.

"Why wait three days?" the mustached man asked. "Why not fly out to the Yellow now and destroy them while we have the chance? They will not be prepared."

"We must be prepared as well," Granna said. She took a moment to look at each person in the face. "I do not want to lose any of you. Go now. Get sleep. Eat. Prepare for war."

* * *

THREE DAYS LATER, Tressa pulled on the armor Fi had supplied for her.

"How long am I to remain prisoner here?" Avital asked from the corner of the room.

Two guards stood outside her chambers. She had asked to speak with Avital, and this was the only way she could get some privacy with him.

"As soon as the war is over, you'll be freed. No one here will harm you. They just don't want you turning on them either. And I think it's clear I no longer need your protection." Tressa adjusted the armor over her chest. It was surprisingly lightweight, which was good for the dragons. Too much weight would slow them down.

"This is not what I agreed to," Avital said. "I am a warrior, and I should be with my people."

"I understand that," Tressa said. "But I also owe much to your brother. I won't send you home only to face slaughter."

Avital punched a fist into his open hand. "It is how I want to die. Fighting is in my blood. I live to serve the Yellow. Not cower in the prisons of the Black."

"I know that. I do," Tressa said. "But what would I tell Jarrett if you died in battle when I knew full well I could prevent it? No, I won't risk it." She took a deep breath and walked over to Avital, laying her hand on his. "You are like family to me, regardless of our differences."

Avital yanked his wrist, but he couldn't get his hand away from hers. The guards had tied his arms and legs to the chair. Another concession she had reluctantly agreed to. "You are not my family. You are not wed to my brother. The two of you have promised nothing. A romp in the sack does not constitute marriage and family. If that was the case, the queen of Risos, the one your lead Black dragon fried, would be my family as well. Who should I fight for? The woman who kept Jarrett satisfied for years, or you, who has been in his life less than a year?"

Tressa crossed the room and knocked on the door. The guards entered, their faces grim. "Is everything okay?" the one on the right asked.

"Yes. We're done here," Tressa said. "Take him back to his cell."

Avital struggled against the guards' grip to no avail. They untied Avital and dragged him out of the room by his arms.

"I won't forget this," Avital yelled back to Tressa. "You are marked, and I will be the one to claim your life."

Fi stepped through the doorway. "He's lovely, isn't he?"

Tressa laughed and closed the door behind her friend. "I don't know him well, but he is Jarrett's brother, so I'm determined to treat him with respect. It isn't easy."

"He's spirited. That's a good trait." Fi smiled. "The armor suits you."

Tressa shrugged. "It fits. I'm not thrilled to be going into battle

again. Frankly, I'm a little tired of it."

"I can imagine," Fi said. She ran her hands through her black hair. "We only have a little time before we leave for battle. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Tressa stood in front of the mirror. Fi's reflection paced nervously, her hands behind her back. "What is it?"

Fi sat on the bed. "It's Sarah. She's scared I'm not going to come back. After the way Sophia spoke in the battle room, I almost believe this will be my last flight."

"Oh, Fi, don't think that way. You've heard what I've been through since getting out of Hutton's Bridge. I'm not dead yet." Tressa sat down next to her.

Fi rolled her eyes. "Death is inevitable. No one lives forever. Not even my great-uncle, though some say Mestifito has been here since the beginning of all time. If someone slices off my head, it can't grow back."

Tressa patted Fi's head. "Don't worry. I won't let that happen. I'll be on your back, protecting you."

A smile graced Fi's face. "Then let's do this. Are you ready?"

"No." Tressa slid the helmet over her head and patted the sword at her hip. "I don't think anyone is ever ready for something like this. But we have to face it. Whether I like it or not, Granna is right. We have to end this. Otherwise our lives will continue to be embattled. As much as I hate fighting, I do want the strife to stop. If we can show the Red and Yellow how strong we are, maybe we can broker some kind of peace. Now may be our only chance."

"I'm glad we're in this together." Fi linked arms with Tressa, and they left for the main cavern.

Hundreds of dragons flew in the middle of the town square, far more than had answered the call days ago.

"Where did they all come from?" Tressa asked, her jaw dropping. "Does the Black also turn their babies into dragons like in the Meadowlands?"

"No," Fi said. "We are simply larger than any of the other dragon hordes. Far older, too. It is said we were the first. We will be the last."

Tressa marveled at how organized they were. In spite of having hidden underground for many years, convincing the rest of the Dragonlands they were extinct, these dragons were quite skilled. Groups flew in formations, practicing maneuvers that defied death. The riders held on with nothing more than their gloved hands, appearing as one with the dragons.

"We won't be that good," Tressa said. "Maybe you should say your final goodbyes to Sarah."

"Don't go morbid on me, Tressa! Those are the elite guard. Do you

think Sophia would have called them to action for a simple diplomatic meeting with the Yellow? If Jacinda's son knew about them, then they might prepare differently for battle. Right now all they know is that we're a small group of Black dragons led by an old woman. Who's afraid of that? No one."

Tressa found her great-grandmother sitting on a throne next to the magnificent Black dragon Mestifito. She stroked his head and cooed into his ear.

"What does he look like as a human?" Tressa asked Fi.

"Who? Mestifito? He can't change anymore. At least no one has seen him change in a very long time. Some believe he prefers his dragon form. Others think he lost his ability to change."

"What do you believe?"

Fi took a deep breath. "I believe he lost his humanity when he was separated from Sophia. We all know the story—how he found her in the woods. How they pledged their love, but she returned to her village. Their love is a great one. It defied boundaries. It is a love story to be sung for all eternity."

Tressa felt a pang in her heart. Her whole life she had been the focus of Granna's love and attention. Each was all the other had. Now they were together again, but so far apart. Tressa ached for the woman she knew growing up. Maybe if they both survived the war, they could find their way back again.

Chapter 19

A scout flew in, pulling up alongside Granna and Mestifito. They had been flying for days, and finally the horde of Black dragons landed in a grassy field just south of the Hills of Flame. Riders dismounted their dragons. Dragons turned into human form. The riders stretched and the fliers rested, sharing the food and water carried by three dragons in the rear.

This would be their last stop before descending on the Red in Malum.

"Destrian is there. Our scouts have confirmed his arrival just last night." The rider said, his dragon lay on the ground, breathing heavily. "We flew as fast and as hard as we could."

"Get him some water," Granna shouted.

The rider bowed, then took off in search of a bucket of water for his dragon.

"Why doesn't he change back into a human?" Tressa asked Granna.

"He's pushed himself too far. It's better for him to recover in dragon form. The human body is too frail." Granna walked away and laid a hand on Mestifito's head. He purred like an overgrown cat and nuzzled into her.

"How much longer until we take off again?" Tressa asked Fi, who was lying on the grass, twirling her hair with a finger.

Fi shrugged. "Whenever Mestifito decides. If he's ready to fight, then we follow."

Tressa reclined next to her. Clouds danced in the sky while birds darted through them. There were many layers to the world. Nature lived together in harmony, dealing with the ebb and flow of life. Why couldn't the dragons do the same?

"Because it's in the dragon's nature to fight," Fi said, answering Tressa's thoughts.

"Whoa." Tressa sat up. "How did you do that?"

"When we fly together, our thoughts become linked. Haven't you noticed I always know exactly what you want me to do when you're on my back?" Fi laughed.

"I thought that was because I was digging my heels into your side,"

Tressa said. "Like that horse I rode once. Doesn't it work the same way?"

"Oh, Tressa." Fi rolled over on her stomach, her chin in her hands. "A horse isn't much bigger than you. He can feel it when you kick him. Me? I'm huge when I'm in dragon form. Your heels in my sides are about as painful as a light breeze on a summer day."

"Okay. Maybe you can hear me somehow while we're flying. But why can't I hear you?" Tressa stared at Fi, challenging her to prove it.

A small noise buzzed around Tressa's head. She swatted the air, expecting to find a mosquito. Instead the noise only increased until the buzzing became words.

Helloooooooo. Anybody in there?

"Nice," Tressa said. "That's all you could think to say?"

Fi laughed, kicking her feet in the air. "I'm tired. Don't expect too much."

"So how come I can hear you now? I'm not riding you. You're not a dragon," Tressa asked.

"I don't know the answer to that question. Some can. Some can't. Sophia and Mestifito seem to speak without words all the time. Maybe it's based on trust. No one really knows."

"Interesting," Tressa said. "We've become friends so fast and been through so much in the short time we've known each other. It doesn't surprise me we've gotten close quickly." She glanced down at Fi, who had rolled onto her back again and was staring at the sky with her mouth open.

What is it? Tressa asked, trying out the new skill.

Fi's hand trembled as one finger lifted toward the sky. Then she jumped up, screaming, "Attack! Attack!"

Tressa's eyes darted to the sky. A moment ago all she'd seen was peace. Now the sky stormed with Red dragons. Talons glinted in the sunlight. Mouths dripped with sharp teeth. Tressa's heart raced. She scrambled to put on her armor and helmet. Fi had already changed into a dragon. Tressa leapt onto Fi's back, drawing her sword.

It wasn't where they'd wanted to fight. It wasn't how they'd wanted to begin battle. It was too soon. But none of that mattered. The Black horde burst into the sky, ready and willing to fight until every enemy was vanquished.

Fi darted in and out of the fray as Tressa slashed her sword at their attackers. Her steel met with dragon flesh, quickly becoming stained with their blood. Fi's anger bubbled in the back of Tressa's mind. It was distracting, pulling Tressa out of battle and into Fi's worries.

She steeled herself and stopped paying attention to her dear friend. Just as the day she fought on Connor's back to kill Stacia, Tressa needed every ounce of concentration she could muster. Tressa's back

stiffened, ready to face whatever fate had in store for her that day.

The Black horde screeched through the sky, flying faster and nimbler than the Red horde. Dragons clashed. Talons grabbed hold of limbs, tearing skin. Blood fell from the clouds like rain.

Fi darted to the left and Tressa hung on with all of her might. A maroon dragon fell from above, careening past them to the ground with a loud thump, one wing broken and folded under itself. Tressa didn't stop to see if it moved. Didn't matter. The dragon couldn't fly now.

Then it hit her. They didn't need to kill the dragons. They only needed to maim as many wings as they could. She shared her idea with Fi, whose head bobbed in agreement.

Fi weaved in and out of the fray as Tressa sliced at the wings of the Red dragons. One by one, the other Black dragons saw what they were doing and joined in.

A screech rang out behind them. Fi banked sharply to the left. Before Tressa could grip her scales, she slipped off Fi's back and fell through the air.

Fi! she screamed, her arms flailing.

Where are you? Fi yelled.

Before Tressa could respond, she landed with a thump. Her stomach sank to her feet as the dragon underneath her ascended. A tap on her shoulder forced her to turn around. A man grinned, a sword in his hand.

Tressa looked down. Sunlight bathed the dragon, illuminating its red scales.

"Gods!" she screamed, reaching for her sword. This was not part of the plan.

She gripped the dragon with her thighs, balancing with her core while swinging with all her might at the warrior behind her. He ducked, surprised at her quick attack and slid off the dragon, falling just as Tressa had—only no one caught him. His body landed on the ground with a thud. The dragon screamed, whipping its head around, snapping at Tressa, teeth dripping with saliva. She scooted up closer to the neck. The dragon couldn't reach her, coming too close to biting itself. Its neck snapped forward, and it tried a new tactic, gyrating back and forth with its whole body and erratically flapping its wings.

Tressa managed to sheath her sword and hung on as tightly as she could with both arms. Her muscles were quickly tiring. She wouldn't be able to hang on for long. The dragon was infinitely more powerful than she was. They both knew it.

Fi! she screamed again in her head.

I can't get to you. The Red army has blocked us. No one can get to you, Tressa. You're on your own. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

Fear bubbled in Tressa's chest. Wind whipped at her face, scratching with clawed gusts. Tears streamed down her cheeks. This was it. She'd tire out long before the dragon. Soon she'd be joining the dead man on the ground, her fate tied to his for eternity.

Her nails dug into the scales. But the dragon's momentum tore a nail from her finger, causing searing pain unlike anything she'd ever felt. She fumbled, her hands grasping for anything, but her muscles unable to comply. Tressa flopped backward, only the grip of her legs keeping her from death.

With one more calculated snap of the dragon's torso, Tressa's legs finally lost their grasp. The dragon tossed her into the open air. Her arms and legs splayed wide as she fell. There was no one to save her this time. No warrior. No dragon. Nothing.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the ground to break her back. An image of Jarrett flashed in her mind. He traced her cheekbone with his thumb and his lips fell on hers. Her friends. Bastian. Connor. The people of Hutton's Bridge she'd fought so hard to save. It couldn't end like this. Not now!

Tressa gasped. "No!" she screamed, letting the word stretch on forever.

Until her arms and legs jerked. Her body ripped in two. Fire shot out her mouth. She soared in the sky, waiting for the ground to kill her...until she realized the ground wasn't coming any closer. Her arms and legs had changed. She whipped her neck around, and realizing she was no longer human. She was like the others in the sky.

A dragon!

Going on instinct, Tressa flapped her wings, the wind bending to her will. She rose higher and higher, coming up behind the dragons that believed she'd fallen to her death. She opened her mouth, reached inside herself for the anger she felt toward these Red dragons, and let loose a blast of fire, roasting the backsides of every dragon within her reach.

Confusion reigned. Screaming, the dragons spun around to attack Tressa. She flew higher until she was above all of them, then darted as quickly as possible to her own Black horde. The dragons clashed again underneath her, the Black fighting with a renewed vigor.

Tressa flew to the back of her horde. Exhausted. Exhilarated. A million feelings swept over her.

Now she understood why everyone who could change into a dragon had issues with controlling their temper. Nothing could match the power coursing through her veins. She didn't want to change back into a human. Never.

Until Jarrett's face flashed into her memory again. Her heart tore in two. One half wanting forever to be a dragon. The other half

wanting forever to remain human with him.

She shook her long neck. Not now. There was a battle to be fought.

Tressa reared back, screaming at the sun. The day would be hers and so would the victory. She flew into the battle, slashing with her claws and whipping her tail. Red dragons screamed in agony, but they couldn't compete with Tressa's newly born bloodlust.

Her talons gutted the Red. Her teeth bit into their scales and snapped their necks. Her fire burned their eyes, blinding them.

Tressa was the bringer of death, and quickly they knew it. The Red turned tail, fleeing back north. This time the Black did not retire to the ground. They gave chase, letting the Red know they would not win. Not today. Not ever. The Black pursued with fire and claws and swords. Their human riders screamed obscenities.

They gave chase until every last Red was dead, littering the ground like leaves after a storm.

Mestifito took the lead, flying north until they found a meadow large enough for all of their dragons to land. Tressa coasted to the ground, landing on her feet. Her talons scraped at the grass. She closed her eyes, let out a breath, and collapsed.

A cloak spread over her body. Her eyes fluttered open. She was human again. And naked. But she did not care. Her blood ran with fire now.

"Well, wasn't that something?" Fi said, prancing around Tressa like an excited pony.

"It was unexpected," Granna said, standing next to Tressa, tapping her toe. "You could have gotten yourself killed."

"I almost did," Tressa said, sitting up. "If I hadn't changed into a dragon, I'd be dead back there with the rest of them."

"And I think Tressa's fighting spirit gave us all the boost we needed," Fi said, defending her. "We might have been the dead ones if she hadn't found it within herself to change."

"And now that you have," Granna said, "you will be flying right back to the Ruins and going into seclusion until you have mastered what it means to be a dragon and what it means to join the Black horde. We do not take our dragon forms lightly."

"Neither do I," Tressa said. "But there is a war to be fought. I have friends to find. Once I've done all that, I'll go underground and meditate or whatever it is you want. But I will not be herded like a child when I can be of use here."

Granna stared at her, turned on one heel, and stalked away.

"She still thinks of me as a child," Tressa grumbled.

"You are nothing like a child," Fi said. "She just worries about you."

"You're always defending her," Tressa said, pouting. "I thought you were my friend."

"Sophia is the queen. She speaks for Mestifito. Questioning her isn't wise."

Tressa snorted, feeling a slight burning sensation in her nose. Curious.

"I can fly back to the battlefield and find someone your size. You'll be needing clothes, since you so carelessly ripped yours." Fi winked. "Don't worry, you'll learn soon enough how to change your clothes while turning into a dragon."

"Thanks," Tressa said, blushing.

"Lie down." Fi patted her on the shoulder. "You can get dressed when you wake up."

Tressa nodded and nestled into the cloak. Soon she drifted off to sleep, visions of dragonfire dancing in her mind.

Chapter 20

Bastian held Elinor in his arms as she sobbed. The wounds

Jarrett had given her had closed on their own within moments. Bastian wanted to ask her how, but all that mattered at the moment was that she was okay. Dragon bodies lay all around. Limbs carpeted the floor, mingling with fresh blood. Connor clung to the only remaining dragon.

"Where did Jarrett go?" Bastian demanded.

"I'll kill him. I swear if I ever see Jarrett again, I will rip his arms from his body," Connor said. "I will shove his legs up his arse and feed him his own heart. I will pluck his eyeballs from their sockets and—"

"That's enough," Elinor shouted. She pulled away from Bastian. Her wounds were gone, but blood stained her gown. "I have no idea what happened here. Jarrett was supposed to be our friend. Did the island do something to him? Or was he always like this?" She whirled around, glaring at Bastian. "He's your old girlfriend's new lover. Can we trust any of them? Can I even trust you?" Elinor inched away from Bastian, scooting closer to Connor and the baby dragon.

"Elinor," Bastian said, holding out a hand. "Come on. You know I had nothing to do with this."

She spat on the ground at his feet. "I regret the day I volunteered to be the one to heal you. I thought you had some grand destiny. Otherwise, why would I have done what I did for you?" Elinor kicked at Bastian when he reached for her.

Connor wrapped an arm around Elinor, pulling her to him. "Let's not judge so hastily." Connor looked at them with sad eyes. "We managed to save one. I do not know if it was the egg I made with Stacia, but it doesn't matter. This is my child, and I will name her Vatra. She is now Fotia's sister."

The tiny dragon hobbled off of Connor's lap. One back leg was shorter than the other and her head bobbed to the side.

"She might be yours, Connor," Elinor said, calming down. She peeled a piece of speckled blue shell off the dragon's leg. "If this shard came from her egg, then she is indeed yours. This shard matches your egg, the one we saw when we were in the cave near the Snake River.

But she's not fully developed. I think it was too early for her to hatch." She reached out, patting the little dragon on the head.

"It doesn't matter. I will love her the same," Connor stood. "Now what? How do we get off this island? Do either of you know how to sail?"

Bastian looked to Elinor. She shook her head.

"You told me it was easy," Bastian said to her.

She shrugged. "I wanted you to believe in yourself. I know nothing about sailing."

"Then there's only one way," Connor said. "We fly out."

"Jarrett said the Keepers hate dragons. Horrible things happen to dragons on this island." Elinor choked back a new round of tears. "Anyone who could do this to poor, defenseless babies..."

"She's right, Connor," Bastian said. "We can't let them kill you too. I won't risk it."

"We need to get out of here," Connor said. "There's no other way. Either we fly or we die."

Elinor rubbed her temples. "Fine. But we walk to the shore. Then you change and fly us out as fast as you can." She reached down, picking up little Vatra and cradling the dragon in her arms. Vatra cooed and licked Elinor's face. "She's just as sweet as Fotia."

"We should bury the bodies first," Bastian said, his eyes sweeping over the mess. "We can't leave this slaughter here."

Connor took a deep breath. "We have to. There isn't time. If we want to escape with our lives, we need to leave now. As much as it kills me to leave them here like this, we can't risk taking the time, especially since we don't have so much as a shovel. It would take too long to dig the graves with our bare hands."

Bastian rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Then we should be off."

Elinor led the way through the tunnel. They stepped into the waning light of day at the entrance. "My father's body is gone too. Just as well."

"What do you reckon took it?" Bastian asked.

Connor shrugged. "Who cares? The bastard stole my children. He deserves whatever he gets." He looked at Elinor. "I'm not sorry for feeling that way."

She gave him a weary smile. "I don't blame you."

The three walked in silence to the south, trying to retrace their original path back to the shore. Once they flew across the sea, they'd land in the Meadowlands.

They reached the shore sometime in the middle of the night. Water lapped peacefully against the sand, as if nothing evil had befallen the island.

Elinor gazed into the sky. "It seems safe." She cradled Vatra, asleep in her arms.

Connor nodded. He changed into a dragon. Bastian quickly hoisted Elinor and Vatra onto Connor's back. Then he swung up behind them. Bastian wrapped one arm around Elinor's waist, pulling her close. With his other hand, he grabbed Connor's scales.

"No quick moves, Connor," Bastian yelled. He still wasn't sure if Connor could hear him in dragon form.

"I'm sorry again, Bastian," Elinor said as Connor gently lifted off from the shore, heading up and over the sea. "With everything that's been happening, it's hard to know who to trust."

He wanted to laugh, but he couldn't do more than sigh. "It's okay. It wasn't long ago I thought you'd betrayed Connor and the dragon eggs back in Ashoom. It seems we both have a lot to learn about the other."

Elinor stiffened against him. "I want to trust you. More than anyone I've ever known, I want you to be the one I can count on. I wish...there could be more for us."

Bastian didn't know how to reply. He'd given his heart once only to have it trampled on. All the other women he'd known had only been a distraction from Tressa. Now he could have anyone he wanted. This tiny woman in front of him, who'd so infuriated Bastian from the moment he met her, occupied more time in his thoughts than he'd like to admit. And now she had told him she wanted him.

"I'm sorry." Her voice traveled back to him, despite the roaring wind. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"Oh, Elinor." Bastian leaned in closer, his lips ticking her ear. "I can't promise anything. Not now. But you are in my thoughts too. All the time." He kissed her hair, then rested his chin on the crown on her head.

Elinor melted into him. They didn't say another word during the short flight to the Meadowlands. The stars lit their way as they passed from danger to safety through lazy clouds.

When they landed, Elinor and Vatra slid to the ground. Bastian stood solidly on two feet, and only then realized how exhausted he was. Connor changed to human form so quickly that he ended up with his socks on his hands.

Connor laughed, pulling the socks off. "I need to eat. I'm guessing Vatra does, too. Mind if we do some hunting near the shore?"

"No." Elinor said, "You two go. Bastian and I will sleep for now." She slid her hand in Bastian's, giving it a squeeze.

A lump formed in his throat. Suddenly the last thing he wanted to do was sleep, despite his growing exhaustion.

"I'll take the first watch, then," Connor said. "You two get some

shut-eye. I'll wake up Elinor for the second watch."

Bastian nodded, letting Elinor lead him away into the tall grass. They lay down, fingers intertwined, watching the stars twinkle. He felt shy, which was something he'd never experienced when alone with a woman. Seduction usually came easily to him, but tonight his instincts were off-kilter.

"Bastian," Elinor said, sitting up. Slowly she pushed her cloak off, then unlaced her gown. The fabric gaped open, but still hid her delicate skin. "I know you can't promise me anything. I just know how I feel, and I don't want to miss an opportunity to be with you. Since I met you, life has proved fleeting. So many have died. I don't want to die without feeling your hands on me."

He swallowed. He wanted to grab her, rip her dress off, and make love to her. But this shyness was new. He wasn't sure how to cope with it. Elinor was so beautiful. Her golden curls glowed in the starlight. Her smile lit up the quiet night.

She reached for his hand, pulling it closer until it rested on her shoulder. "Please?" She kept her hand on his, using it to push her gown off her shoulder until it fell to her waist, exposing her to the night air.

Elinor leaned down, her lips caressing Bastian's. She straddled his hips, pushing down on him so unexpectedly hard that all of his inhibitions fell away. Bastian's hands explored Elinor's back. He cupped her bottom, pulling her even closer.

She gasped. "I guess you are interested in me. I was beginning to wonder." She dove back in, her lips on his neck.

Elinor pulled his shirt over his head. Then her fingers turned to his breeches. She played with the strings, pulling one slowly after the other. He wanted to tell her to hurry, but held back when she bit his lip. Bastian groaned. He'd never wanted any woman as much as he wanted Elinor. Tired of waiting, he pulled off his breeches and flipped positions, slamming her back onto the ground. "I'm so sorry. Did that hurt? I didn't mean to be so rough."

Elinor giggled. "I'm not a delicate flower, Bastian. Feel free to do anything you like."

Bastian leaned in, forgetting that the world around him was in chaos.

Chapter 21

The next day, Connor, in dragon form, landed in the throne room. Bastian slid off his back, holding his arms out for Elinor. She lingered in his embrace only for a moment. With a shy glance, she sashayed away from him. Bastian ached to reach out for the contradictory woman. Sweet, but hiding an animal inside. They'd agreed to keep their tryst away from prying eyes until they knew exactly what they wanted from each other. Bastian had to think of his daughter now.

With bright eyes, Farah ran and jumped into his arms. She snuggled against his chest and he held on to her as if he'd never let her go.

"Are you staying, Dada?" she asked him. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too," he mumbled into her hair. At only three, she was already wise. He planted a kiss on Farah's cheek and pushed her back toward the other children. She smiled and waved as she ran into the fray.

He looked at the children of Hutton's Bridge, running and playing in the throne room. They'd all witnessed things they shouldn't at such a young age. Hazel stood in the center of the chaos, her eyes trained on Connor as he changed from a dragon into a man. At least this time his socks were on his feet.

Hazel watched Connor silently. He looked at her, confusion and sadness pulsating in his gaze. He turned and left the throne room, Fotia and Vatra on his heels.

Hazel made her way through the throng of children toward Bastian, narrowly avoiding a few collisions. "I see you found some of the eggs." Her eyes wandered to the doors.

Bastian nodded. "Unfortunately Vatra was the only survivor. The rest were brutally murdered." He hesitated, but the truth would have to come out soon enough. "Jarrett did it."

"Jarrett?" Hazel remained calm, a mother's response in the middle of a storm. "Why?"

"I wish I knew," Bastian said. "He was different all of a sudden. Murderous. Callous. Not the man I thought I knew. At least Tressa

wasn't here to witness it. It'll break her heart, but she's better off without him. Jarrett disappeared after the slaughter. We haven't seen him since."

Hazel placed a hand on Bastian's arm. "Maybe this means your time with Tressa has finally come."

Bastian hadn't thought of that. Jarrett's betrayal meant Tressa would be free again. He flashed back to his night with Elinor. Thought of the way her head tilted when she laughed. The bright smile she flashed when she was happy. The low growl in the back of her throat when he touched her. He looked at Hazel, remembering where he was. "I think Tressa and I are done for good. We've both moved on."

Hazel's shoulders fell. "Do you think there's any chance Connor will still have me?"

Bastian wished he knew the answer. "Inside, Connor is the same man. He has holes in his memory, and he's been through a trauma we will never understand. I can't say with certainty that he'll ever fully come back to us." He wrapped an arm around Hazel's shoulders. "But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

"I have to make him understand that I love him. I want to share in his joys and his sadness. Whether he is human or he is dragon, he is my Connor and I will never give up on him," she said, looking up at Bastian with tears in her eyes.

"Then go to him," Bastian said. He gave her a little push toward the doors. "I'll keep an eye on the children."

"Thank you," Hazel said. She gave Bastian a quick hug and took off in a run.

Elinor looked up from the corner of the room where she was reading a book to a small group of children. She smiled at Bastian and nodded. She approved. He knew she would. Hazel and Connor deserved a happily ever after more than anyone.

Bastian wished it were guaranteed. In Hutton's Bridge, nothing could have ever come between them. In the world outside, no one seemed safe. He watched Elinor, her blond curls cascading over her shoulder. Her smile reassured the children, who were adapting to their new situation quickly, but they still harbored a deep fear that might never leave them. One curled up on Elinor's lap, resting his head on the crook of her arm.

Elinor was the right one to offer solace. Her heart was big enough to love all of them, despite only meeting them not long ago. Bastian looked to the rest of the children, running and yelling as they threw a ball back and forth in a game they'd invented.

"What are the rules?" he asked a little girl.

She darted past him, laughing as if she hadn't a care in the world. "Keep running and don't let anyone hit you with the ball!"

Bastian joined in the game, dodging and running, but often getting hit because he was the biggest and slowest target. Kids darted between his legs and used him as a shield. Bastian laughed like he hadn't in a very long time, until his chest heaved and his sides hurt. He glanced over at Elinor again. She sat alone with the little boy curled up and sleeping in her lap. The other children had scattered. Elinor smiled at Bastian, slow and lazy, while she stroked the napping boy's hair.

It felt strange finding happiness in this place, amid the chaos of battle and death.

The doors to the throne room flung open, destroying the peace that had settled over them. A man in a gray cloak burst into the room, his presence so commanding even the children stopped to stare at his wide mustache and square shoulders. Though he only stood a head shorter than Bastian, he seemed as if he was the largest person in the room. A scar slashed through the left side of his face. A puckered hole rested where his left eye should have been.

"King of the Blue." The man nodded at Bastian. "I am a scout. I have a report for you."

"A scout? I didn't send anyone out." Bastian said, wondering who the mystery man was. His face wasn't familiar. Not from the Black Guard. Not from the soldiers he'd seen stationed at the castle.

The man clicked his heels together and snapped his chin to attention. "The battles have begun. The Black and the Red clashed north of here. Many riders and dragons are dead, littering the ground with their broken bodies. My men and I have risen from the ruins to the west to offer our arms in the cause. I am Donovan." The man bowed, his hands out to Bastian.

Bastian looked at Elinor. He didn't know what he was supposed to do. She shrugged, uncertain as well.

"Stand up, friend," Bastian said.

The man straightened. "Are you not the ruler of the Blue?"

He was, he supposed. "We will not take part in the battle between the Black and the Red." Bastian gestured toward the children. "We are harboring refugees right now. We do not have the manpower to fight, nor the dragons. We only have one full-grown dragon. What can we do in a battle against many others?"

Another man burst through the doorway. "Very little, but we want to fight." It was Marden, the leader of the Black Guard. Bastian hadn't seen him since before they'd left for Malum in search of the people of Hutton's Bridge. "We have been trained for battle. It is what we want. Let us march in the name of the Blue. The Black have risen. Long ago they were our allies. We will stand with them again."

"Is this truly what you want?" Bastian asked. "The dragon will not fly out with you. There will be no additional support offered."

Marden squeezed his hands into fists. "We hate the Red. If they should succeed in defeating the Black, then we will all be under their cruel rule. I have a family, too. I will not let the Red harm them."

His brother Barden stepped out from behind him. "We saw the Black dragons here. Everyone in Ashoom knows they are still our allies. Otherwise we'd be dead."

Bastian nodded. "It is true that they helped us when we were rescuing the children from Malum. But I don't know enough about them to guarantee your safety. I don't even know if they want our help."

Marden ignored Bastian. Instead, he held out a hand to the man in gray, who took it solidly in his. "I know who you are. I did not know the Watchers still existed after the Vulture's Tower was destroyed in the last war."

"Some survived, and they kept the old ways alive. We have been waiting for the next war to begin and our scouts assure us it has. It is the time to rise to arms to protect our children and families. Will you join us?"

The two men looked to Bastian, eagerness burning in their eyes. They wanted war, and it appeared it had begun. "I won't fight," he said firmly. "And neither will my dragon, but all we have is yours. Take whatever supplies you need."

"And healers," Elinor said. She smiled. "I will talk to those in my guild and request their assistance. I know they will agree."

The man in gray bowed. "I am Donovan. Do not forget it. You will be hearing from me again." He clicked his heels together again and left the throne room, dragging Marden and Barden in his wake.

"Those two have nothing better to do than follow trouble, do they?" Bastian asked Elinor.

She shook her head. "It appears so. Yet I have a feeling this is something bigger than any of us can fathom."

Bastian had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He was afraid she was right. He looked at the children, who'd gone back to playing. Would they ever have the chance to grow up in a peaceful world, or would battle and dragonfire surround them forever?

Chapter 22

Tressa stretched her arms and legs after a long day of riding Fi during the daily scouting. So far there'd been no more sightings of the Red since the Black had driven them from the battlefield days ago.

Granna and Mestifito had sequestered themselves from the rest of the camp, trying to decide what to do next. Spies had returned from Road's End, the town closest to the Red Throne. They had counted numerous Red dragons training for another battle. Their elevated numbers made the earlier battle seem like a minor skirmish. Every night the council met to discuss the situation. The Red army was larger than they'd imagined, and they weren't sure how to proceed.

Tressa was embarrassed she hadn't been able to change into a dragon again. Fi assured her over and over that this was normal. It was part of the learning process. Not every person could control their dragon after the first change. Tressa had witnessed Henry's difficulties with controlling his dragon side before he'd been so brutally killed by the Blue queen, Stacia. Yet Connor seemed to have no trouble changing between human and dragon. Tressa wanted to be like him.

She hated not being in control of herself, fearful and hopeful every breath that she might change. In her dreams she could fly again. It was the most exhilarating experience she'd ever had. She wanted to feel it again. She wanted to burst through the clouds, letting the wet wisps cover her body until she flew into a sunbeam and dried off.

"What were you thinking when you changed?" Fi asked Tressa. "Maybe that will help you to do it again."

Tressa tapped her chin with a finger. "I remember thinking I was going to die. But that wasn't the first time I feared death since leaving Hutton's Bridge."

"There's a big difference between fearing death and knowing you're about to die," Fi said. "There's a difference between hope and acceptance."

Tressa sat down on a fallen tree. She used a hand to shield her eyes from the bright sun. "Well, if I have to be on the brink of death to change again, I hope it's a long time before I do."

"You don't mean that." Fi bumped Tressa with her hip, forcing

Tressa to scoot over. "You loved every second in your dragon form. Admit it."

Tressa smiled. "Okay, I did. And I want it back more than anything. I just can't seem to make it happen." She clamped her eyes shut and wished it with all the mental strength she had. Still nothing.

"Rule number one," Fi said, "don't try to change into a dragon when someone is sitting right next to you. I could accidentally get a claw to the heart or lose an arm."

Tressa laughed so hard she nearly fell off the log. "Sorry. I didn't think of that. Next time I'll make sure I have space."

"And if you feel it coming on, let everyone around you know."

"Done."

A rustle in the trees told them they weren't alone. A puffing Jenfar emerged, his face red behind his thick mustache and chest heaving. "We're off soon. Heading due north."

Fi jumped up. "Not northeast to Malum?"

"No." He bent over, taking a few gasping breaths. "We're going closer to the sea. Sophia still wants to attack, but Mestifito thinks it will be better to come from an unlikely direction. They'll expect an attack from the south or from the southeast. Not from the sea."

"Won't that take us near the Isle of Repose?" Fi asked. "I studied my geography growing up. And my mythology. I'm not sure it's wise to go anywhere near that island."

Jenfar stood. "Sophia and Mestifito have made their decision. Either you follow or go home, Fi."

She planted her hands on her hips. "I will never walk away from a battle, Jenfar. You know that. Come on, Tressa, let's prepare to take flight."

Tressa followed Fi out of the trees, frustrated. She wanted to fly along with them, not ride on Fi's back like a regular human. Days ago Tressa would have been thrilled just to have the chance to take part in the battle. But now that she knew she could change, she wanted to be the one to fly.

They left the tree cover and found the rest of their small army preparing to leave. The dragons who carried the supplies were getting packs loaded onto their backs. The warriors were donning their armor, while the lead dragons had already changed. There was an empty spot in the front of the formation waiting for Fi and Tressa.

They scrambled into place. Fi transformed and Tressa wore her new armor stolen from a dead Red warrior. She felt out of place wearing red while everyone else was dressed in black, but she had no other option. It was that or be naked.

Tressa climbed onto Fi's back. Within breaths they were airborne, heading north toward the sea. They flew for the better part of a day.

Tressa snacked on jerky and bread from the bag slung on her back. All riders carried their own basic supplies to avoid frequent stops. She took a sip from her water skin, saving as much of it as she could for the rest of the journey.

Eventually the sea appeared in the distance. The setting sun bounced off the gentle waves. The scent of salt permeated the thick air, tickling Tressa's nose. She tried not to think about the time she'd been trapped in the small boat, stuck out in the sea, wondering if she'd ever make it back to shore alive.

Why hadn't she changed into a dragon then? Was it possible she hadn't lost hope yet, that she'd still believed everything would work out okay, even though she had no food or drink? But when she fell from Fi's back, there had truly been no option. She'd had to change or die in a broken heap of bones on the unforgiving earth.

The dragon horde banked to the left, flying along the seashore. The ground wasn't sandy and filled with tall grass like in the Sands. Here in the Hills of Flame, rocks covered the bank leading to scorched, dry earth. Cracks raced around the ground like thousands of little roads.

We'll camp here, Fi told Tressa.

Tressa turned up her nose. She didn't see a freshwater source nearby. She was relieved she'd been stingy with drinking from her skin. And at least she could bathe in the seawater. After everything she'd been through, she needed a good cleansing.

The dragons circled, landing one at a time, claiming their spots. Fi was always one of the last to land. She'd explained to Tressa it was because she wanted to keep an eye out in the skies until the very end.

As they circled lazily, Tressa swallowed a fearful breath and let go of Fi's scales. She slipped off the side, falling through the air, waiting for the change to come again. Willing it. Then panicking when she realized it might not happen again. Tressa screamed, her arms flailing in the air until the wind was knocked out of her. She opened her eyes, feeling an arm around her waist.

Granna whispered in her ear. "You can't just force your dragon out like that. You'll kill yourself first."

"Nothing else has worked," Tressa protested. "I just want to be like everyone else."

"You are nothing like the others," Granna said as they coasted to the ground, Mestifito landing with a jarring thump. Tressa tumbled off his back and onto the hard ground. Her head smarting, she sat up. Granna slid off Mestifito, landing next to Tressa. "You have a death wish."

"I only want to be able to control the dragon inside me. I see nothing wrong with that," Tressa snapped. "If you hadn't caught me, I might be flying right now."

"If I hadn't caught you, you would have broken your neck on the landing. I'd be asking the men to bury you." Granna turned on one heel and stalked away.

Tressa rubbed the back of her head and stood. She wandered over to the bank, pulled her boots off, yanked up the bottom of her pants, and waded into the water. The water nipped at her toes, cooling her off quickly. She took a few deep breaths and looked to the northwest. Out there was the island that made the hair stand up on Fi's arms. No matter. She turned back to the east. Their true enemy lay hidden in the hills, secreted away in a castle Tressa hadn't even glimpsed in Malum.

Fi had shown her a map of the city. It was the largest in the Dragonlands, even dwarfing the size of the Ruins of Ebon, under the Charred Barrens. The castle itself was inaccessible without a dragon, built into the crags of the hills. They'd have to fly in and confront the queen. Tressa wanted to kill her after what had happened in Malum during the Descent Festival.

No one wanted peace. They all wanted to fight. To dominate the other, even in the Black, when they supposedly wanted nothing to do with the rest of the Dragonlands. Tressa could see the bloodlust in their eyes. Hear the ferocity of their speech when they spouted rhetoric at war meetings.

They wanted to control the dragons. Rule the realm.

Tressa only knew what she wanted: a world of quiet and peace. Unfortunately it seemed less and less like the Black wanted the same.

She looked toward the sea again. A light breeze drifted over the water, swirling around her body.

"Tressa."

She looked around, but no one else was near. They were all working to set up the camp for the night.

"Tressa."

It wasn't coming from behind her. No, the voice was coming from the sea...and it sounded oddly similar to Jarrett.

Chapter 23

As night fell, the Black dragons and their riders settled down for the night. Three dragons and their riders remained in the sky, circling and watching. Granna curled up with Mestifito in the center of camp. Tressa laid out her bedroll next to Fi, who was in her human form and already snoring. The fires had died down. There were no more quiet murmurs in the night. Everyone had fallen asleep.

Tressa snatched her black cloak and pulled the hood over her head. Carefully she tiptoed around sleeping people. No one stirred.

Tressa made her way to the shoreline. She sat on the rocky beach, just above where the waves lapped. Slipping her feet into the cool water, she closed her eyes and waited again for the voice that had sounded so much like Jarrett's. Even the gulls were quiet. Tressa let out a long breath and looked up at the stars.

They'd offered her healing when she'd been trapped on the water. Perhaps tonight they would guide her toward her destiny. Toward that dragon form she wanted so desperately to regain. Tressa untied the cloak from her neck and let it drop to the ground. She took off her tunic and pants. Then her leggings and underthings. Standing naked in the half-light of the moon, Tressa walked into the water. It bit her ankles, then her knees, and then her thighs. Still, she didn't stop. She didn't recoil against the freezing water. Instead she embraced it, walking until the water kissed her chin.

Tressa closed her eyes and pursed her lips together as she continued on her walk. The water lapped against her cheeks and forehead, then covered her completely. She blew out the breath she'd been holding and opened her eyes.

Tiny fish swam around her body; seaweed blanketed the sea floor. Tressa's hair floated up like the tentacles of the squid she'd seen in one of Granna's old books. Her chest ached. Her lungs burned, and her lips opened. Water rushed in. Her vision wavered, black and gray merging with the moonlit sea. Her brain became foggier than the veil that had once surrounded Hutton's Bridge.

Tressa's arms floated to her sides as her body collapsed in on itself. Surrendering. Her last thought was of Jarrett's voice calling to her

from the sea.

Then it happened.

Her body convulsed, limbs breaking into the form of a dragon. She stretched her wings and burst free from the cold grip of the underwater grave. A burst of fire from her mouth dried up the water she'd swallowed.

In the air, she felt free. Finally. All those years trapped in Hutton's Bridge. All that time running around the Dragonlands, asking for help from people secretly plotting their own agendas. Now she needed no one.

Power throbbed in her veins as she flew through the night sky, climbing higher and higher until she tore through a puffy cloud. The moon waited on the other side with the stars that winked at her. She winked back with one slitted eye.

Tressa.

There it was again. This time it was clearer. Definitely Jarrett.

Jarrett? She tried thinking to him like she'd done with Fi. Flying farther out to sea, Tressa thought his name a few more times. No response. Just the quiet of dark night.

Can you hear me?

Her heart leapt. It was definitely Jarrett.

I can. Where are you? Are you with Bastian and Connor? She waited eagerly for a response.

Come closer to the island.

Tressa flew northwest toward the island far in the distance. Then she realized there was something Jarrett didn't know. *I've changed*, she thought to him. *I'm not as you remember me.*

Come closer. Closer...

Tressa flew on, her heart pounding. What would he think of her as a dragon?

Closer...

His voice echoed in her head. He had to know something had changed. If he'd ever communicated with Jacinda through thought, then he had to know.

Jarrett—

CLOSER!

Her head ached. He'd been too loud. Too forceful. Still, she flew, the island coming closer with every flap of her wings. Her heart thudded in her chest as she glided toward the shore, toward the figure of a man who she would know, even in shadow. Jarrett.

She landed on the beach, and then realized she had no clothes. She'd taken them all off before entering the sea.

Her claws dug into the sandy beach. She looked down at him, and he didn't seem surprised. He wore a felt hat on his head, pulled down

over his ears. Tressa cocked her head to the side, observing him.

Jarrett seemed different somehow, but she wasn't sure what it was. Yet she was pulled to him. Her desire to get near to him, outweighing any anxiety she had over the strange meeting, and the even stranger way he called her to him.

He reached a hand toward her snout. She craned her neck and nuzzled his palm, taking a deep whiff. He smelled like Jarrett—and something else she couldn't place. She shrugged off the uneasy feeling. This was the first time she'd seen him while she was in dragon form. Maybe her sense of smell was different. That had to be it.

"Tressa." Jarrett said it simply, as if it wasn't a surprise that she was now a dragon. As if he expected it. A smile spread across his face, his teeth glinting off the moonlight. "I've been waiting for you."

Where are the others? Bastian? Connor? Elinor?

Jarrett only smiled. Perhaps he couldn't hear her after all. She craned her neck, looking for her friends, but found they were alone on the beach. Not another sound in the still night air.

"Why don't you change?" he asked. "Where is the woman I love?"

Tressa thought about changing. Running into his arms. Modesty held her back. Instead, she reached down and plucked the hat off his head with her teeth, remembering all the times they'd made each other laugh. That, she could still do.

Jarrett screamed, his eyes narrowing and his teeth suddenly sharp and threatening.

Tressa stumbled backward, her tail swishing behind her. Then she saw it. Jarrett's ears. They were gone.

Jarrett clapped his hands together and rubbed them. It was a gesture she knew. One she suddenly feared. A yellow light quickly turned red as he opened his hands toward her. Tressa pushed off from the ground, but it was too late. His magic ran through her foot, slicing it. With blood dripping, Tressa heaved herself upward, dodging the balls of fire coming from his hands.

Why? she screamed.

I am the killer of dragons. I am the Keeper.

Tressa flew away, fear driving her wings, despite her mind and heart begging her to go back to him. Her stomach twisted as she fought to get farther away from Jarrett. From her lover. She looked back one last time. He stood on the beach, his hands now at his sides.

Joy filled her heart. He wouldn't try to hurt her. Not again. Tressa turned, flying back toward the island, ignoring that voice in her head telling her something was wrong.

As she ventured closer, Jarrett began to shoot balls of fire from his hands again. Over and over she dodged them, until one hit her in the chest. Shocked and saddened, she turned away, using all of the

strength she had to fly back to her Black dragons.

Chapter 24

Tressa fell to the grass, weary and wounded. The moment she touched ground, she reverted back into human form. The camp sprang to life. Someone barked out orders for water, clothes, and bandages. She heard Granna's voice in the distance, ordering more scouts into the air. Tressa wanted to tell them it wasn't necessary, that she hadn't met with anyone from the Red. They were safe unless Jarrett found a way to fly across the sea.

Hot water washed over her stinging wounds, cleaning them of any infection. A squishy paste was applied to her back and linen wrapped around her chest. Tressa sat up, her mind still a little fuzzy.

"What were you thinking?" Fi screamed. "You could have gotten yourself killed."

Tressa thought back to her near-drowning. Perhaps it would be best to keep that to herself. "I'm sorry."

Fi grunted, then wrapped her arms carefully around Tressa. "Don't do that to me again. It's one thing to get hurt in battle, it's another to just take off in the middle of the night and come back injured. What happened?"

Tressa took a deep breath, gasping at the stabbing pain in her chest. Jarrett's fireballs had hit her only once. If she hadn't gotten away, she could have died at his hands. But part of her wanted to go back. What happened to his ears and why did he want to kill her? Something was desperately wrong. Her heart told her Jarrett needed her, but her mind told her to forget him.

"I went out on the beach," Tressa said. "Just for a walk and maybe a little swim. The waves pulled me out to sea and I started to drown." It was a lie, but she didn't want to upset Fi more. "Then I transformed into my dragon."

Fi tapped a foot on the ground. "And how did you get hurt?"

Tressa looked down at her bare feet. She wanted to tell Fi the truth, but so much of it didn't make sense. She still wasn't sure why she'd been so drawn to his call, and so hesitant to leave. Until she knew more, she would keep the details to herself. "I lost control and hit some rocks in the sea. Then I realized I shouldn't be out there

alone and I flew back." The lies rolled off her tongue.

Fi looked up at the sky, the pink haze of morning barely creeping above the horizon. "We have to leave soon. Did you get any sleep?"

Tressa nodded. "Enough." Another lie. She hadn't slept at all. She was exhausted, but she knew if she admitted to it, they'd never let her ride into battle.

"Your chest will heal up soon enough, mistress," said the healer. "It was only a flesh wound. You're a lucky girl."

Tressa didn't know the man's name, so she bowed her head in thanks. Standing up wasn't painless, but she did it with a smile on her face. "I'll try to be more careful next time."

"There will be no next time," Granna said from behind.

Tressa steeled herself and turned to face her great-grandmother. "I will do as I please. If Fi agrees to let me ride with her, I will."

Granna's eyes locked on Tressa's. Her jaw was set, and her teeth clenched. "Tressa—"

"Don't." Tressa walked away. But guilt gnawed at her insides. She was angry at Granna for the lies she'd told and the secrets she'd kept all those years. Yet now Tressa was doing the same.

She wanted to convince herself that her reasons were far nobler. That she kept secrets out of love and self-preservation.

The same reasons Granna had given her when she'd tried to explain.

Still, Tressa didn't turn around. She didn't apologize. She didn't tell Granna she understood. Because she wasn't completely sure she did yet. What she'd kept hidden felt far more important. Besides, they weren't headed to the Isle of Repose. Jarrett couldn't hurt any of them from so far away. If their safety was in peril, she would have confessed.

At least that's what she told herself.

They prepared, ready to ride into battle. They'd storm the castle from the air, leading with the strongest attack dragons—those who had the hottest fire. Behind them would fly the dragons with riders. Tressa and her fellow warriors would drop into the castle and take on the humans. The dragons would fight it out in the sky.

Tressa bent at the waist, and was surprised how quickly her wound was healing. She didn't feel one twinge of pain.

"Our healers are very talented," Fi said, sneaking up behind Tressa and tossing an arm over her shoulder. "The dragon blood flowing in your veins helps too. We heal faster. A fatal blow isn't likely to heal up, but small ones are. It's definitely an advantage to being able to change. Our bodies respond differently to everything. Just wait until you and Jarrett meet up again." Fi winked. "Everything between you will be different."

Tressa offered Fi a weak smile. After what Jarrett had just done to her, she wasn't sure they'd ever be together like that again. He'd been Jacinda's lover for years. How had sex been different for him then?

Fi headed to the clearing where the other dragons were changing. "See you soon!" she yelled over her shoulder.

Tressa went back to their spot in the camp, pulling on the Red uniform. Someone had fetched it from the beach where she'd left it before the suicide attempt that resulted in changing into the dragon. She grabbed her sword. It was time to ride to battle—and for the first time, she wanted nothing more than to walk away from it all.

* * *

TRESSA CLIMBED on Fi's back, weary, but ready. What other choice was there? Stay behind? Tell the others she was just too tired? No, none of that would do. The Black had saved her and her friends in Malum without being asked. She at least owed them her sword.

You okay? Fi asked. *We're almost there.*

I know, Tressa answered. *I'm okay.*

You're not. I can tell. Why don't I drop into the back? We can avoid the bulk of the battle that way.

You don't really want to do that. Tressa knew Fi. Her friend wanted to fight. She wanted to be in the lead. And she was prepared to kill.

You're right, I don't. If you change your mind, tell me.

Tressa didn't respond. She leaned down, resting her chin on Fi's scaly neck. Her sleeves flapped in the wind. The smell of saltwater lingered in the air. She closed her eyes, enjoying the last moments of peace before her world would explode into one of blood and death. Soon the smell of copper would overtake her. Everything else lost in the heat of battle.

Suddenly, Tressa's heart began pounding. Her lungs felt hot with fire. She sat up, her eyes snapping open.

Fi, drop to the back. NOW!

Without hesitation, Fi descended below her fellow dragons, letting them fly over, their wings beating wind down.

Tressa held onto Fi until the last supply and medic dragons passed. Then she let go. Fi flew forward, as if she knew exactly what was coming.

Tressa's clothes tore. Her sword plummeted to the ground. A spasm shook through her body, then bloomed into her dragon form. She flapped her wings and pulled up alongside Fi.

Well, I wasn't expecting that. Tressa bared her sharp teeth in a smile. It hadn't taken long, but she already preferred being a dragon to being a woman.

I had a feeling it might happen, Fi answered. In the beginning, the change is hard to control. You're smart enough to feel it coming. Soon you'll be able to control it.

I hope so. Had she been human, Tressa would have laughed nervously. What if I fall out of the sky?

Just focus and it won't happen, Fi said. At least, let's hope it doesn't.

The two dragons raced to catch up, passing the medic and supply dragons. The healers raised their hands toward the two, offering them luck. Tressa blew a little smoke into the sky in appreciation.

Her exhaustion wore off with each flap of her wings. But there was something lingering in the back of her mind. Jarrett standing on the shore of that island. She swore she could still hear him calling her.

"Tressa..."

And she knew if he kept calling, she'd be powerless to resist.

Chapter 25

Bastian twirled a lock of Elinor's hair around a finger. He kissed her milky white shoulder. "Finally, everything has settled down," he said. "We've gotten rid of every enemy in our way."

Elinor snuggled into his chest, tracing his muscles with her fingertip. "You know that's not true."

"We can pretend, can't we?"

She rolled over and sat up. The blanket that had been covering Elinor's naked body fell to her waist. Bastian gulped and forced himself to look her in the eyes.

"Bastian, we may have taken ourselves out of one battle, but it doesn't mean the war is over. We still have plenty of enemies out there. The realms are rising. The Black, Yellow, and Red are all at war. The Green is trapped..."

"And the Blue cowers in the corner of the Dragonlands," Bastian said. He reached out, his hands caressing her breasts. "I've heard all the rumors."

Elinor bit her lip, her eyes closing. "It's not a rumor, Bastian." A little moan escaped her lips before she ripped the sheet from the rest of her body.

Bastian quieted her questions with his lips, and soothed away her worries with his hands. The sun rose, blanketing them with a warm beam as they made love.

"Enough," Elinor finally said, laughing. She pushed Bastian away from her swollen lips and flushed skin.

"It's never enough," he said, his lips curled in a smile.

"Don't you get tired?" Elinor slipped out of bed and pulled on a silken robe. Sapphire blue, it had been one of Stacia's. Elegant and sexy at the same time.

"I do," Bastian said. "But some things are worth doing even if I'm exhausted."

Elinor rested her hand over her chest. "You're insatiable."

"Let me show you." Bastian waggled his eyebrows and dove after her.

Elinor squealed, hiding behind a chair. "Your daughter will be

wondering why you missed both breakfast and the midday meal."

"Fine, fine." Bastian sauntered over to the wardrobe and pulled on a fresh pair of pants, then tossed a new white shirt over his head. Elinor's eyes were trained on him. "Like what you see?"

"You know I do." She let her robe fall off and stood stark naked in front of him.

"What are you trying to do to me?" Bastian asked.

Elinor winked. "Nothing. Why?"

She sashayed across the room, standing next to him at the wardrobe. Tapping her finger on her chin, Elinor surveyed the hanging gowns. "What should I wear?" She ran a hand across the rainbow of fabrics.

"Nothing," Bastian said. "Absolutely nothing." He wanted to pick her up and drag her back to their bed, but Elinor was right. Farah would want to know where he was. They'd just been reunited. He didn't want his daughter to feel neglected.

"You'll meet me in the throne room later?" Bastian asked.

Elinor nodded and sat down, still naked. She began brushing her long blond hair. Each stroke made his blood boil.

"I need to go," Bastian said.

Elinor looked up from under her long lashes, her smile curving into a pink bow. "I understand. I'll find something to wear and be down soon."

Bastian nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. He closed the door behind him and leaned against the stone wall, grateful for the cool dampness. He adjusted his pants, thought of the smell of kilrothgi, and let his lust disintegrate. Taking a couple of deep breaths, Bastian made his way through the castle to the throne room.

Though the castle had plenty of room for all of the children, Bastian, Elinor, and Hazel had decided to keep them all inside until they were sure the children were safe in Ashoom. The rumors had already started, spreading throughout the castle and into the town.

Demons from the Red.

Spawn of the Dragons.

Spies of Short Stature.

There was no end to the ridiculous things people whispered in each other's ears. Bastian wouldn't allow his daughter anywhere near their crazy ideas. When men feared what they did not understand, only chaos ensued. Bastian had seen it in his own village. He would not allow his daughter to be affected by any of it.

He strode into the throne room. The children were running and laughing, just as they'd been the days before. He was relieved and grateful they'd all seemed to come through unscathed. All but one screamed with joy when he entered the room. The boy who'd sat in

Elinor's lap days ago still sat alone in the corner, his nose buried in a book. No matter. There was always at least one child who preferred reading and the solitary life. Often Connor had been that boy when they were little. It was only when Tressa and Bastian goaded him into playing that Connor would come out of his shell.

Farah ran to him, and Bastian scooped her up in his arms.

"Dada, I missed you." She pecked Bastian on his stubbly cheek.

"I missed you too. Did you sleep well in the dormitory?"

Farah bobbed her head up and down. "I wish I could stay with you." She pouted, her lower lip sticking out much too far.

"It's better for you to stay with the other children and the nurses," Bastian said, feeling guilty. It was true they had decided the children should stay together for now, under the care of Hazel and a couple of the female healers from Elinor's guild. But Bastian had agreed to it partially so he could save his nights for Elinor. He hadn't ever wanted anyone as much as he wanted her. In the past, most of his conquests would bore him after one or two dalliances. Not Elinor.

"When can we go home?" Farah asked him.

Bastian set her down. "I don't know." He wasn't even sure he wanted to go back to Hutton's Bridge. "Don't you like it here?"

Farah shrugged. "It's okay. I miss my bed and my doll."

Before Bastian could answer, Farah ran off into the fray, laughing. Children. Everything was so simple to them.

Hazel came over, her youngest in her arms. "She's a sweet little girl. Reminds me of you," she said, watching Farah grab a ball away from a bigger boy and hand it to a little toddler.

Bastian laughed. "I was more like the bully who took the ball away from the children."

"Give yourself some credit, Bastian," Hazel said. "You are a good man. Look at everything you've done here."

"I've done what needed to be done. I didn't ask for any of this. Connor would have been better suited to leading us through this." He looked at Hazel, the pain in her eyes apparent. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She switched the baby from one hip to the other. "Well, it's not, but I'm being patient. I keep hoping he'll remember, but that doesn't seem likely. If he hasn't yet, he's not likely to."

"He loves you," Bastian said.

"Loved." Hazel let out a long breath. "The problem is that I still love him."

"Don't give up on Connor. I still believe his memories are there. Maybe locked away, but there still."

"Maybe." Hazel shrugged. "I can't count on it. I'll try to win him back, though. Despite our marriage being one of convenience, I have never loved another man. He felt the same about me. I'll just have to

make him see it again." She smiled, but it wasn't as bright as Bastian remembered. Some of the confidence was gone, replaced by regret.

"I think that's a great idea," Bastian said. He placed a hand on Hazel's shoulder and smiled. She was a good woman. It was only a matter of time before Connor took her back.

"At least we're done with the fighting. I know it had to be hard for you to stay here and let the battle rage on in the Dragonlands, but it was the right decision for the children. They've been exposed to too much violence. And while they didn't understand a lot of what happened in Malum, many of them have lost their parents and grandparents. Just like the day the fog fell when Sophia was a child, the children of Hutton's Bridge have once again been orphaned."

"Not all of them," Bastian said. "You, Connor, and I are still here."

"Yes," Hazel said, nodding. "And now we focus on caring for them instead of fearing for our lives."

Bastian was about to agree, when a screech ripped through the sky. He looked up and a dragon flew into the throne room from the window high above. A Yellow dragon, one with fire in its eyes, landed on the floor, its talons scratching the marble with a high-pitched shriek.

The children ran screaming out of the throne room, ushered out by the two healers and Hazel. She glanced at Bastian over her shoulder, fear and anger mixing in her expression. Elinor slipped past Hazel, shooing her out the door after the children. Running to Bastian's side, Elinor panted. "Who is that?"

"I don't know," Bastian said, "but I have a sick feeling we're about to find out."

Chapter 26

The Yellow dragon transformed into a man clad in armor. "I am Destrian. The war to end all dragon wars has begun. Claim your side now." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Bastian looked at Elinor. Eyes wide, she didn't have anything to offer. As the unofficial leader of the Blue, and only because he had Connor on his side, Bastian knew the decision was his to make. He glanced back at the doors where the children had escaped only moments ago. His daughter. Connor's boys. They were his first priority.

"We remain neutral," Bastian said. He stepped closer to the man in armor, his shoulders back, chest thrust forward, daring Destrian to question him. "Some of our men have chosen to fight, but I do not command them."

Destrian threw back his head and laughed. "I was told you might react this way. Very well. We shall take over your filthy insignificant town and kill your dragon as soon as we have crushed the Black and the Green."

Before Bastian could offer a retort, the armored man changed back into a dragon and flew out the upper window.

"I guess that means we're no longer remaining neutral," Bastian said. "So much for our new quiet life here."

"You knew it was only a matter of time," Elinor said.

The doors burst open and Connor ran in the throne room. "Where is it? I'll kill it." His head whipped side-to-side, reminding Bastian of the way Connor moved in dragon form.

Bastian laid a hand on Connor's shoulder. "He's gone."

"What did he want?" Connor's nostrils flared.

"He wants us to choose sides in the war." Bastian paced the throne room. "We have the children to think about. I don't want them involved in another battle. They shouldn't be caught in the middle of this."

"Either we go to war, or war comes to us," Elinor said. "We're fools if we think we can remain neutral."

Connor nodded, staring at Bastian. They both expected him to

make a decision. He sat on the throne, his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands. This wasn't the life he wanted. He'd been unhappy in Hutton's Bridge, trapped and forced into a marriage with a woman he despised. And yet, life had been simple. Easy. Peaceful. Quiet.

Bastian sat up. His hands gripped the armrests. His knuckles turned white as he squeezed harder and harder.

"Hutton's Bridge," he said.

"What about it?" Connor asked. "You were there. You saw. It's dead. No one is there."

"Exactly," Bastian said. "The children. We'll take the children to Hutton's Bridge."

Elinor shook her head. "That's a terrible idea. It's open on all sides, with nothing protecting it other than the forest—" She stopped abruptly and looked at Bastian. "The fog is gone."

Bastian stared back at Elinor. It was the perfect plan.

"What?" Connor asked, looking between the two of them. "Is there something else I don't remember?"

Bastian had told Connor about the fog and how it fell. Well, not completely. He hadn't told him about the woman in the tree and her two brothers on the other sides of the forest. She'd protected him and he was determined to protect her. But now, he needed her. If they could take the children to Hutton's Bridge and raise the fog once more, they'd be safe. And this time Bastian knew how to take it down again. Their entrapment would only be temporary, until the war was over.

"Bastian," Elinor said, her hands on her hips, "is there something you haven't told us?"

"I'm the one who took the fog down," Bastian said. "I'm also the only one who knows how to raise it again." The others who knew about the woman in the tree had died in Malum during the Descent Festival. The children would be safe and protected there. "If we do this, I will have to share the secret with the two of you. In case something happens to me, others must know how to get the children out again."

Elinor hurried to his side, the bottom of her gown billowing around her booted feet. "This might be the best idea you've ever had. We know the fog is nearly impenetrable. Hidden behind it, the children will be safe."

"And this time there won't be any dangerous beasts hiding in the fog. We just have to convince the children to stay until we come back. No wandering." Bastian stood up. "Do you think it could work?"

Connor furrowed his brows. "If there's nothing in the fog threatening to kill us, what will keep others from entering it and

taking the children hostage? The children won't be safe. Anyone can walk through a fog."

"True." Bastian sat down again, defeated. It had seemed like a grand idea.

"Unless there was something to protect them," Connor said. "I could."

"But what's the difference between protecting them there and protecting them here?" Elinor asked.

Bastian spoke up. "Everyone knew death lay within the fog last time. Perhaps we make it seem as if it does again. The woman in the tree, she has the power to destroy anything that comes into the forest. She nearly destroyed me." He remembered the ball of light coming from her hand and his fall through the trees. He'd been lucky to land on a bough strong enough to support his weight.

"Then I think we should do this," Connor said. "I will take Hazel and the children and the healers if they will come too."

"I can almost assure you they will go," Elinor said. "It is our calling. Once we heal someone, often we are attached to them for life." She glanced at Bastian and smiled. "Many of the children needed healing when they arrived here. These women attended to their wounds, both physical and emotional. I cannot imagine they would abandon the children now. I will ask them."

Connor nodded. "I would like to consult with Hazel first."

Bastian shot a quick glance to Elinor. Connor was coming around, then. In the past he'd rarely made a decision without talking it over with his wife. They'd once worked as the perfect team. It made him happy to see Connor moving in that direction again.

"I think that's wise," Bastian said. Connor nodded and left the throne room in search of his wife.

"So," Bastian said to Elinor, "you're only with me now because you healed me?" He hoped there was more to it than that.

"Bastian..." Elinor said with longing. "Few healers end up romantically involved with the ones they heal. It crosses a line. We are tasked to be compassionate and caring. To heal those who cannot heal themselves. To offer our moon when someone of value is dying. To make the ultimate sacrifice for one who must survive, despite all costs." With the last sentence she looked at the floor.

"What is this ultimate sacrifice?" Bastian asked, taking Elinor's hand in his.

She sniffled, refusing to look at him. Bastian rested a finger under her chin, but she wouldn't let him raise it.

"Elinor? What is it?"

"Do you remember before we left for Malum? How I told you there was something in my childhood?" Her eyes remained trained on the

floor.

"Yes," Bastian said. "I didn't want to pry if you weren't ready to talk about it."

"My father." She took in a ragged breath. "He told me that when I grew up, I would be the most famous of all healers. That I would work with him to bring the world to a greater destiny. He saw things, Bastian. Horrible things. He would wake from nightmares screaming about dragons and how he would rule them all."

Bastian kept silent. He knew Malachi had stolen the baby dragons for some reason. But to claim it was destiny? Look where destiny had gotten him. Dismembered on the Isle of Repose. He'd also gotten all but two of the baby dragons killed.

"He told me that one day I would use my moon to save the Red Queen. That she would reward us handsomely. That we would be the most powerful of all healers."

"You wouldn't do that." Bastian pulled Elinor in for a hug, her chest and shoulders heaving with every wet breath.

"I can't do that," Elinor said. "It's impossible."

"No, you have your moon back. You used it to heal me, but more than a moon has passed. You can heal again if you choose to. But I know you would never choose to heal the enemy and join her."

Elinor pulled back. Her arms stiff at her sides and her hands in fists, she looked up at Bastian. "I didn't just give you my moon, Bastian. I gave you my ultimate sacrifice."

"I'm not familiar with healers, Elinor. I don't know what that means." He didn't like where the conversation was heading.

"When a healer makes the ultimate sacrifice, she not only gives her moon, she gives all of her healing. Forever." Elinor choked in a breath.

"I still don't understand," Bastian said. "Speak plainly." He gazed at the woman he desired. The one who brought him more happiness than any other woman he'd known. What had she done?

"You cannot die easily, Bastian. I gave you my healing. As long as your heart beats, your body will heal itself." Tears spilled from her cheeks. "I did it not because I loved you, but because I wanted to relieve myself of the power to give my moon. I did not want to become what my father had dreamed for me." Elinor took a deep breath. "There is more. You saw how my wound healed so quickly on the Isle of Repose?"

Bastian nodded, mute.

"As long as your heart beats, mine does too. We are connected. Forever."

"But when your father tortured you, I took you to a healer..." Bastian remembered the moment so clearly. He thought she'd betrayed them, then found Elinor beaten, bloody, and tied up. She

needed a healer, and an old man helped her.

Elinor shook her head, tears bubbling at the corners of her eyes. “I did not want you to know then. I thought you would be angry with me for what I’d done. I let myself be healed, even though I didn’t need it. At the time I thought it would be better if you never knew. Had I known I would love you, had I known you would love me back...I never would have cursed us.”

She turned and ran from the throne room. Bastian stood still, his mouth agape.

Chapter 27

Tressa flew into the battle, power coursing through her veins.

Dragons darted in every direction. Smoke billowed around Tressa, blinding her. The fray was too chaotic, too packed, and she feared getting caught in a blast of dragonfire. Claws slashed. Swords clanged and whips cracked, wielded by a few Red riders standing on the backs of their dragons. Screams ripped through the sky as both humans and dragons fell to their death.

Tressa let herself fall, feigning an injury. Her chest heaved as she drifted to the ground, exhausted. She gazed into the sky. The Black dragons fought ferociously, felling Red after Red after Red. The field around her blossomed with bodies. Blood hung in the air, heavier than rain on a stormy day.

"Tressa..." The voice whispered to her on the wind.

Jarrett's pleas didn't abate, muffling even the screams of the battle. Tressa felt her resistance weakening. Yes, he had tried to kill her, but she knew it was only because something grave was wrong with him. Otherwise he never would have hurt her. Jarrett hadn't abandoned her when her change began. She'd be damned if she left him when he needed her most.

She looked at the battle again. Granna rode Mestifito, striking down enemies in their path. Her new friends wouldn't miss her if she left. All that mattered was Jarrett.

Tressa rose into the air, fighting against the strong wind, heading west and north, toward the island where she'd found Jarrett.

Something tickled at her mind, an insistent voice, but she shoved it away. Whoever it was didn't need her. Jarrett needed her. Only Jarrett. Jarrett.

Her mind rang with only one thought. One desire. One compulsion.

She flew away from the people who'd taken her in toward the one who loved her most. Nothing mattered but Jarrett.

Tressa thought to look back once more but her neck wouldn't move. Instead, her snout pointed directly toward the Isle of Repose. Toward Jarrett. Toward the only thing she cared about.

She flew and flew, her wings tiring. But still she kept on, not letting anything stand in the way of reaching Jarrett. She struggled to stay aloft against the pull of the earth. Somehow she won. Somehow she kept on until the island came into sight again.

He stood on the beach still, looking for her. Waiting. Unflinching.

Her body couldn't sustain one more moment of being a dragon. Tressa landed next to him and she changed back into a human.

"Jarrett." She reached out a hand, her vision swimming.

He came closer, and she saw a strange, felt hat pulled over his ears. She recognized it, remembered playfully tugging at it—but that was all. Clouded memories swirled around her head. Tressa couldn't make sense of any of them.

His strong arms lifted her. Tressa's head slumped against his shoulder.

"I'll take care of you," he whispered in her ear. "I promise. You can trust me."

Tressa wanted to agree, but she couldn't even nod her head. She felt like something was pulling her down, just like when she'd almost drowned. She could feel the water swimming around her, muffling every thought. Jarrett whispered words she couldn't understand. Like a lullaby, it calmed her. She gave up fighting Jarrett just as she had given up fighting with the Black in battle. None of it mattered. Just Jarrett's arms around her.

A loud screech broke through the calm. Tressa's body jostled in Jarrett's arms as he began to run. Her head bobbed against his shoulder. She tried to lift it but couldn't. She was too tired. His whispers became more frantic, but they told her to relax. She did. In Jarrett's arms, she would always be safe.

A blast of heat erupted behind them. Jarrett stopped and turned. Tressa's eyes fluttered open. There was a dragon. A Black one. It was so magnificent.

Fi.

It was Fi!

Tressa shook her head, attempting to knock off the weariness. To regain her senses. But every time she thought she was about to achieve clarity, her head became muddled again. There was something she thought she should know about the Black dragon, but she'd lost it.

"You'll kill her," Jarrett shouted at the dragon. "Stop where you are."

The dragon fell to all fours, its head low, eyes watching. Nostrils flaring, it sniffed at them.

Tressa laughed and reached out a hand.

"Don't," Jarrett said. He laid her on the ground and stood in front

of her.

Tressa considered standing but didn't. Or couldn't. She wasn't sure.

"Face me as a human," he told the dragon, rubbing his hands together.

The dragon scraped a front claw in the ground.

"I will kill you either way. But if you have words you want to say to Tressa before you die, then now is the time."

The dragon paused, then transformed into a woman. Fi! Tressa knew her!

Tressa struggled to sit up, but her body wouldn't cooperate. She pushed her palms into the pebbled beach. She strained. Nothing. She slumped back to the ground again.

"Let her go," Fi demanded.

"No. She wants to be here with me. Just ask her," Jarrett said.

"Tressa?" Fi asked.

They locked eyes, but Fi didn't come any closer.

"I want to be here," Tressa said. Her lips moved. The voice came from her. Yet she wasn't sure why she'd said it.

"Tressa..." Fi's voice was plaintive. "Change back. Let's fly away."

Tressa didn't respond. She didn't even really think. She just lay there, her head on her arms. Stars twinkled in the night sky, winking at her. They were pretty. So pretty.

"Go," Jarrett said. "Go back to your kind. Tressa doesn't need or want you here."

"Jarrett." Fi's voice rang with anger. "You let me take her to the Black because you knew I could help her. I've done that. But she's not ready to be on her own yet. Please, let her go. I thought we were friends."

"Friends?" Jarrett's laughter was laced with spittle. "We are not friends. You are filth. You are tainted. You are a dragon and the only thing you deserve is a long, painful death. If you don't leave, I will kill you both. Your choice."

Fi's hands balled into fists. "I won't leave her with you. You're completely insane."

"Then you will die." Jarrett's hands popped in the air, fireballs flying from them.

Tressa watched the yellows and oranges and reds spiraling toward Fi. Her friend changed back into her dragon form, lifting off the ground before the fireballs could hit their target.

Tressa smiled. Her friend was safe. Then she frowned. She wasn't sure what to think. She looked up at Jarrett, who was preparing another round of fire and not paying a lick of attention to her. He had changed. His magic was stronger. More dangerous.

Tressa felt her mind clearing. She sat up, her strength returning.

Jarrett shot more flames into the air. Fi dodged and returned fire with fire, her wings flapping hard. The night lit up with their battle.

Tressa stood, her legs shaky, but solid enough to walk. She stumbled toward Jarrett, her arms outstretched. She loved him. He loved her. She had to understand why he was doing this. She reached out, her fingers grasping for the hat on his head. She tugged, and it fell, fluttering to the ground.

His ears were gone, only blood-crust holes in their place.

Then it all came rushing back. He'd tried to kill her, too. How could she have forgotten?

Jarrett spun, his eyes furious. He grabbed Tressa's chin, forcing her to look at him.

"No," she screamed. Her hands pushed at his face. Thoughts rolled back in, memories repopulated the empty places in her mind. Tressa shook her head. What had he done to her?

"Listen to me." His voice was calm again, soothing. "Tressa, listen..."

"Leave me alone." Tears streamed down her cheeks. He was controlling her using some kind of magic. What had happened to the man she loved? Was he even still in there?

"You must listen," he said again. His hands were on her shoulders.

She settled into him, her head on his chest. Then, when she felt him begin to relax, she pushed back.

Jarrett stumbled, falling onto the ground.

Fi landed on top of him, one massive foot holding him prone.

I'm going to kill him. Fi told Tressa.

Tressa dove to the ground, holding Jarrett's hand. *Don't*, she pleaded. *Not until we know why.*

"*Kill me.*"

"Jarrett," Tressa pleaded, "don't say that." She stroked his hair, the rest of his body still trapped under Fi's claw. He'd controlled her with magic, but now that she had her head back, she would help him. This time it would be because she wanted to—not because he forced her to.

Give me the word, and it's crunch time, Fi thought.

Tressa refused to answer. She wouldn't let Fi crush Jarrett and she wouldn't let Jarrett convince her to.

"Tell me what happened," Tressa said.

"Kill me." He moved his lips, but nothing came out.

Tressa looked up at Fi. *Something has him under a spell. Like he did to me. We have to help him.*

Fi was silent a moment. *We could try taking him somewhere else. Maybe one of our mages back in the Ruins can help him. But if he stays under this spell then I doubt we'll get him off the island. He'll resist. He'll blow you away with one of those fireballs.*

Tressa stood and grabbed the pack from Fi's ankle.

Hey, those are my clothes, Fi said.

I need them more than you do right now. Tressa shrugged on Fi's cloak. She'd been naked the whole time, but too out of it to care. Now that she knew, she wanted to be covered. She walked around the beach until she found exactly what she needed. Picking it up, she hefted it in her hand. Yes, it would do. She just hoped Jarrett would forgive her.

Tressa knelt next to Jarrett's prone body, his face still contorting. She drew back her arm and walloped him on the head with the rock.

Jarrett cried out in pain, then eyes closed and his face relaxed.

Okay, Tressa told Fi. *Ease up. He's out.*

Fi lifted her foot just off of Jarrett, hovering in case he was faking it. But he didn't move.

Now sit and help me get him on your back, Tressa said.

Fi used her tail to help Tressa push Jarrett onto her back. Tressa climbed up behind him, wrapping an arm around his waist.

We probably can't make it back to the Ruins before he wakes, Tressa thought. *Take me to Ashoom. Elinor will know someone who can heal him.*

Without answering, Fi took to the sky. Tressa wanted to talk to her friend, but she knew Fi was irritated with her. They'd both left the battle. There was no telling what kind of trouble they'd be in when they reunited with the Black. Guilt washed over Tressa, even though she knew her departure had little to do with her own desire and more to do with whatever spell Jarrett had put on her.

They flew until the towers of the Blue castle at Ashoom broke through the tips of the trees in the forest. Elinor would find someone to help Jarrett. All would be well. Tressa repeated these thoughts to herself, hoping it would make them reality.

Fi glided through the window at the top of the tower, descending into the throne room. She landed carefully and lay as close to the floor as her belly would allow. Tressa slid down. She ran to the settee, grabbing all the pillows. She tossed them onto the floor next to Fi, who bent to the side, letting Jarrett slide onto them.

Fi changed into her human form, her hands on her hips and a grimace on her face. "I can't believe I followed you out of battle for this." She stomped around the room, her hands waving in the air. "He tried to kill you. TWICE! And you still want to help him? You really need to get your priorities straight."

"What if it was Sarah?" Tressa asked. "Would you just let someone kill her or would you fight to find out what happened to her?"

"Fine." Fi wouldn't say it out loud, but Tressa knew she'd conceded. "Where are your friends?" Fi looked around the empty room.

"I don't know," Tressa said. "I'm sure they're in the castle somewhere. Check at the door for a guard."

Fi skulked to the doors, flinging them open.

Barden jumped out, brandishing a sword. "I'll kill you." He looked over Fi's shoulder, seeing Tressa and Jarrett. "Oh, it's you three." He sheathed the steel.

"Where's Elinor?" Fi asked. "Jarrett is hurt. We need a healer."

"They've gone," the man said. "I'm Barden, by the way. We met once when you were last here." His gaze traveled her body, lingering on her breasts. He winked at Fi with a lecherous smile on his face.

"Look at me that way again and I'll burn off your manhood next time I turn into a dragon."

Barden cupped his hands over his private parts, his mouth forming a little O.

"Now tell me where I can find a healer, or I'll cut off your manhood now." She twirled a small dagger in her hand.

"This way," Barden said, still holding onto himself.

"I'll be back soon," Fi said over her shoulder to Tressa as they left the room.

Tressa looked back at Jarrett. She lifted his head and rested it on

her lap. "We'll fix you, I promise."

She ran her fingers through his hair, just above where his ears had been cut off. "What happened to you?" Leaning over, she kissed his forehead.

His eyes snapped open. "Tressa?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Tressa? I can't hear you." Jarrett's hands flew to his head, his fingers searching, but not finding what they were looking for.

Tressa grabbed his hands, holding them in hers. "Jarrett, you've been injured."

His brows furrowed. She wanted to kick herself. Of course he couldn't hear her. They'd gone far enough away to break the spell that was over him and now he had lost whatever magic had allowed him to hear without his ears. She leaned over, her lips settling on his. Jarrett responded softly, at first, then he pushed her away.

"I remember traveling to the Isle of Repose with Bastian, Connor, and Elinor. I don't remember anything after that. What happened? Did you rescue me? Why can't I hear?" His questions continued, the rambling filling the quiet in the room.

Tressa bit her lip, knowing if she spoke it would only frustrate him more. She laid a finger on his lips, quieting him. Jarrett calmed down. He lifted his head from her lap and sat up.

Tressa rested her hand over his heart, then took his hand and laid it over hers. They sat that way, quiet, alone, feeling the life pumping within each other until Fi burst into the room with an army of healers, their black cloaks flapping behind them.

The healers sank to the floor, forming a circle around Jarrett and Tressa. Linking hands, they murmured the same three words over and over again. "Ommadon, ommadon, ommadon." Tressa didn't know them, but they were soothing. Healing. Tears spilled from Jarrett's eyes. A yellow glow pulsed around his head. Still, Tressa held her hand over his heart, assuring him that he was hers and she was his, no matter the outcome of the healers' magic.

Finally, the man to her right said, "It is beyond us. We cannot help him, mainly because he does not require healing. Whatever happened to him is over. We cannot force body parts to regrow. He will remain deaf for the remainder of his life. Be grateful he is alive."

Tressa's heart fell into her stomach. She looked up at Jarrett, fearing for his reaction. He looked at her expectantly. Shaking her head no, Tressa let her arm drop.

"No?" Jarrett asked. "They can't heal me?"

Tressa stared at him, her mouth turned down. She grabbed both of his hands, squeezing them tightly in hers, willing him to understand that it didn't matter. That she loved him despite his injury. She only

regretted never having told him she loved him.

After Bastian, she'd sworn she wouldn't utter those words again unless she knew it was forever. Though she'd felt love for Jarrett, she hadn't let herself admit it. Now her biggest regret was withholding it from him when he'd been so willing to express his feelings to her.

"But there is a magic surrounding him too," another healer said. She pushed back her hood, revealing a long shock of red hair, the sides of her head shaved. "We cannot break it. We do not have any mages powerful enough."

"Then I know where we must go," Tressa said. She looked to Fi, who stood outside the circle of healers. "When can we leave?"

"Give me some time to rest," Fi said. "I cannot make the rest of the journey without sleep and food."

"You will have it," Tressa said. She looked to the guard, Barden, who had followed Fi back into the throne room. "Where are my friends? We must let them know."

Barden looked around the room, whistling.

"Barden," Fi said, the dagger suddenly back in her hand.

"They're gone," Barden said, "but I ain't supposed to tell."

Tressa wanted to punch him herself. "Tell me, now. Jarrett and I are still technically members of the Black Guard, are we not? You can share the information with us."

"Oh," he said, his eyes locking on hers, "I suppose you are. They've left for Hutton's Bridge. They're gonna seal it back up in the fog again."

Chapter 29

Bastian slid off Connor's back and held out a hand for Elinor.

She jumped off into his arms. He squeezed her before letting her boots touch the ground. Elinor smiled and looked up at the trees marking the entrance to the forest surrounding Hutton's Bridge. Connor quickly changed back into human form, fully clothed.

"Do you know where to find the woman in the tree?" Elinor asked. She'd questioned him extensively about the woman, admitting she was fascinated not just from curiosity, but also from a healer's perspective. Bastian feared the woman would die if she was removed from her arboreal prison. Perhaps Elinor could find a way to help her.

Bastian knew he'd never forget where he'd found the woman. The tree had come to life as the woman imprisoned within its limbs shot magic toward the sky. That sight was forever seared in his memory.

"It's not far. Follow me." Bastian ducked under a tangle of branches, Elinor and Connor following behind him.

"I still think I can protect you better if I'm a dragon," Connor grumbled, bringing up the rear.

"No." Bastian stopped and spun around. "She will kill you. Now follow, and when the time comes let me speak."

The three moved silently through the forest until Bastian found the tree he was looking for.

"Are you sure this is it?" Elinor asked. "It seems like all the other trees." She looked up. "I don't see anything."

"That's just it," Bastian said. "No one is supposed to know she's here. Let's climb."

Bastian jumped, grabbing hold of the lowest branch, and pulling himself up. He reached down for Elinor's hand as Connor gave her a boost. Elinor straddled the limb and carefully pulled herself to standing, her arms wrapped around the tree trunk.

"Are you okay?" Bastian asked. "It's a long way."

"I'll be fine. It's better than staying on the ground alone." Elinor stared at the bark, not looking up or down.

"If you get too scared, just stay where you are. We'll help you get down when we're done." Connor said, pulling onto the branch next to

them. It bounced and swayed, forcing a squeal from Elinor.

Bastian ascended to another branch. "Maybe we should do this one at a time. No one on the same branch at the same time." He looked down. "Elinor, you're after me."

She let out a nervous laugh. When Bastian left his branch, she followed him.

"Stay close to the trunk," he said, trying to make it sound like he did this every day.

"Don't look up or down or you might feel dizzy. Just concentrate on the branch you're climbing to."

He kept up a steady stream of chatter, hoping to distract Elinor. Her face had paled and her breath quickened. Bastian had never seen her this afraid before. Even when they were flying on Connor, she hadn't seemed anxious.

Branch after branch, they ascended, until Bastian paused and placed a finger over his lips. Connor nodded. Elinor blanched as she clung to the trunk, her eyes closed.

"Are you there?" Bastian cursed himself, wishing he'd thought to ask her name before.

Leaves rustled in the light wind, but he did not hear the woman's voice.

"It's Bastian. I've come back, asking you to restore the fog around Hutton's Bridge. Will you help?" He waited again. No response. "Stay here," he whispered to Connor and Elinor.

Bastian climbed higher, until the branches thinned out and he could glimpse the sky through the canopy. He checked the trunk of the tree many times, looking for any trace of the woman, but he could not find her.

Bastian rested against the bark, his arm looped around another branch. It was the right tree. He was sure of it. So where was she?

"Lady of the tree!" he called out.

No response.

Then a crackle caught his attention.

"You should not have returned." Branches came to life, wrapping around Bastian, pulling him closer to the trunk. The woman appeared in the tree, her face pulsing with green veins. "The world is not safe. Go now, hide!"

"I know," Bastian said. He took gentle breaths, refusing to fight her tight grip. "We've come asking you to restore the fog."

"We?" the woman asked. "I sense two others in the tree. I recognize the heart of one, but not the other. Who is she?"

"Healer Elinor."

"A healer?" The branches loosened their tight grip.

"Yes, and you must recognize Connor's heart. He lived in Hutton's

Bridge with me. Would you like to meet them?"

The woman hissed. "The man has a dragon's heart. He is one of them."

"He didn't ask for it," Bastian said. "He was beaten to death and resurrected as a dragon. Then he was imprisoned and raped. Do not blame Connor. His heart may not be purely human, but he is the most honorable man I've ever known."

The woman in the tree let out a sigh, like an unexpected gust on a hot summer day. "If they are your friends, I will accept them, Bastian." She laid one hand on his heart, her fingers small branches with a tiny leaf at the tip of each. "You have changed too. Your life force is different."

Bastian thought of what Elinor had given him. "My life has not been easy since I left your protection. For instance, I am no longer the self-absorbed young man who didn't think to ask your name when we first met."

The woman smiled, her green lips revealing white teeth. "I am Gaia."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Gaia," Bastian said.

Her eyes closed. "My brothers wish you to know their names as well. They are Adamec and Vennox." She opened her eyes. "We will help you, Bastian of Hutton's Bridge. If you ask us to restore the fog, we will."

"I also ask that you not kill Connor when he is in dragon form. He will stay in Hutton's Bridge with the children and a few other adults, as their protector."

"I will know this Connor." The tree trunk closed again, looking just as it had before she'd appeared to him.

Bastian climbed down carefully, stopping on a thick bough next to Elinor, who had her arms wrapped around the trunk, eyes still closed. He looked down at Connor, who was talking animatedly with the tree.

"She can move up and down the tree," Bastian said, amazed. He hadn't realized she could do that.

"I'm sure she's lovely," Elinor said. "I wanted to meet her and ask if there was anything I could do to help, but now all I want is to get down."

A vine unwrapped itself from the tree trunk and wound around Elinor's waist.

"What?" she screamed. "Bastian, help me." Elinor kicked and fought, but the vine was too strong.

"Tell her to be silent," Gaia said. "I am simply helping her to the ground. I shall speak with all three of you there."

Elinor's eyes were wide as the vine lifted her off the branch and slowly descended through the forest. Bastian and Connor scrambled

down, reaching Elinor just as the vine was unwinding.

"Well, that was helpful," Elinor said, smoothing out her dress. "I don't know what came over me. Normally I'm not so afraid of heights."

The tree bark parted and the woman appeared to them. "Many are afraid. It is not the climb, but the painful trip back down that scares them. Bastian knows."

He remembered the first time he'd found Gaia and how she'd nearly killed him by blasting him out of the treetops. Luckily he'd landed on a bough solid enough to break his fall. He glanced at the vine, neatly wrapped around the tree again. Perhaps it hadn't been a coincidence. If Gaia had wanted him dead, she could have made sure he hit the ground.

"So you will help us hide the children in Hutton's Bridge?" Connor asked. "And you won't kill me if I change into a dragon to defend them?"

"I will not," Gaia said. "I have seen your heart, and I recognize it. You will be safe from me and from my brothers. But other dragons will die if they come anywhere near the village. You can count on us to protect your children."

"Thank you," Bastian said. "We will arrive tomorrow with the children and supplies."

"All you need to do is visit me here. I am ready when you are." Gaia caressed Bastian's arm. "I will miss you, Bastian. Visit me anytime you like."

Elinor slipped her hand into Bastian's, squeezing possessively.

"Tomorrow, then," he said, still smiling at Gaia, despite Elinor's fingernails digging into his hand.

Chapter 30

Wary, Bastian and Elinor dismounted Connor in the throne room. Hand in hand, they crossed the marble floor.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Bastian said. "After all the years I spent trapped in that damn village behind the fog, I'm now sticking my own child into it."

"I can't believe it either," said a voice from the throne.

Bastian stepped around to the front. "Tressa! What are you doing here?"

Elinor dropped his hand quickly. Bastian felt hurt. True, he still hadn't told Tressa about Elinor, but he didn't see why Elinor had to act possessive around Gaia and then pretend like there was nothing between them around Tressa. Women. He'd never understand them.

"Hi, Bastian," Tressa said with that familiar grin on her face. For so long, those were the lips he'd kissed, the smile he'd looked for every day, even when they weren't allowed to be together. Now they belonged to someone else.

"What are you doing here?" Bastian spread his arms and motioned for Tressa to give him a hug. She hesitated only a moment, then buried herself in his embrace. Bastian gave her a peck on the head and let go. "I'm glad to see you doing so well. So they were able to heal you in the Charred Barrens? Where's Fi?"

He dreaded the moment she'd ask for Jarrett. The man had killed the dragon babies, and Bastian would never forgive him for it. Connor was likely to kill Jarrett the next time he saw him. He didn't know how to explain what had happened to Tressa.

"Fi's resting. We found an empty chamber for her. I hope that's okay." Tressa said.

"Of course," Bastian said, laughing. "My castle is your castle. If you can even call this mine. It doesn't feel like it."

"Thanks to Connor, it is yours." Tressa looked toward Elinor. Her smile quickly faded. "What's wrong?"

Elinor's arms were crossed over her chest and she wore a mask of anger. "Your boyfriend almost killed us. And he killed all of Connor's newly hatched dragons, except for one."

Tressa's hand flew to her mouth.

Bastian slung an arm around Tressa's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wanted to tell you at the right time." He shot an angry glance at Elinor. How could she? News like that needed time and the right words. Tressa's heartbreak was evidenced by her furrowed brow and shaking hands.

"I didn't know...I mean...I knew there was something wrong with Jarrett when he tried to kill me..." Tressa's words faltered.

Blood boiled in his veins as he squeezed her closer. "He tried to what?"

"Kill her," Elinor said. "Same as what Jarrett did to those poor, defenseless babies. Vatra's lucky she got out alive."

"Vatra?" Tressa asked.

"Connor's own baby. The one in the egg he said was his," Bastian said. "When did Jarrett try to kill you?"

Tressa took a deep breath. "Last night. On the Isle of Repose."

"That's where we left him," Elinor said. "We hoped he'd wither away and die."

"What were you doing there?" Bastian asked Tressa. He wished Elinor would just stay quiet. Tressa had feelings for Jarrett, maybe even loved him. Jarrett may have managed to betray them all, but Bastian wanted to be careful of Tressa's feelings. She'd lost so much since Sophia died.

Tressa took a step back, looking at both Bastian and Elinor. "There are...things...you don't know yet. A lot has happened since I left with Fi. We should go somewhere and sit down."

Bastian didn't like where this was heading. Not one bit. He knew that look in Tressa's eyes. She had secrets, dangerous ones, and Bastian doubted she'd share them all. Tressa had learned at a young age to be secretive. Bastian had forgiven it because she had a hard life growing up without her parents. Even though Sophia was good to Tressa, there was always some separation from the rest of the village. Sophia hadn't mixed much with the other villagers, except for when she had to lead. Tressa had been isolated by default.

"Let's sit then." Elinor stalked off to the large table on the side of the room. It was the same she'd been tortured on. She sat in a chair, her back straight, her hands folded on the table.

Bastian, Connor, and Tressa followed. Bastian looked to his friend. Connor had been silent through the whole conversation. A quick glance at Connor's eyes told Bastian he was exercising great control over his anger.

"I need you listen to what I have to say," Tressa said, "and please don't say anything until I'm done."

"Fair enough," Bastian said.

Connor just nodded.

Bastian reached under the table, settling a hand on Elinor's thigh, but she bumped it off. He didn't try again.

Instead he sat back and listened to Tressa's story. How she'd visited the Black's stronghold. How they numbered in the thousands. How they'd tended to her sickness and nursed her back to health.

She told them about the war, and how they'd flown north to fight with the Red. How she'd been lured to the Isle of Repose.

When she was done, Tressa sat back in her chair.

Bastian doubted she'd told them everything. Her smile was guarded.

"So Jarrett is here?" Elinor asked.

"He's under guard, I swear," Tressa said.

"I'm going to kill him," Connor said, fuming. He stood, his chair falling to the floor.

"Connor!" Bastian leapt up. "Don't."

"Don't? He killed my children! What would you do if he'd killed your daughter? And he tried to kill the woman you spent most of your life loving! How can you tell me to stop?" Connor got in Bastian's face, their noses almost touching.

"You're right. But if Tressa says there's a chance for him to be healed, we have to believe her," Bastian said.

"You can trust her all you want," Connor said. "But I don't remember her and I have no qualms about killing that bastard right now. I'll even do it while he's sleeping. Jarrett doesn't deserve a fair fight."

"Connor, please," Tressa said. She stood slowly, her palms on the table. "I understand this is hard for you."

"Hard? Hard was watching Jarrett murder my children. I will kill him." Connor stalked away from the table, his hands in fists.

Bastian ran after him. He grabbed Connor's shoulder, forcing him to turn around. "You of all people know what it's like to be put under a spell. To be forced to change. What if Tressa's right? What if Jarrett can be redeemed?"

"It doesn't bring my children back to life."

"Neither will killing him." Bastian searched Connor's eyes, waiting for his friend to regain his composure. For Connor to remember he was the levelheaded one. Bastian always had been the hothead, but if he could control his anger in this situation, then Connor could too.

Connor looked back at Tressa. "This is because you still have feelings for her. You act like an idiot whenever she speaks. Even though she's made it very clear she's not interested in you any longer, you still kowtow to her demands. You hang on her every word."

Bastian wanted to retort back, insist he did no such thing. But,

maybe Connor had a point. Maybe Bastian had let his feelings for Tressa, whatever they were now, get in the way of what was really important.

"I'm not going to argue with you," Bastian said.

"Why not?" It came from behind him. Elinor.

Slowly Bastian turned around. He hadn't heard her approach.

"Why not, Bastian? Do you still have feelings for Tressa?" Elinor crossed her arms under her chest.

Her jealousy angered Bastian. Hadn't he shown Elinor repeatedly how he felt about her?

"Was I just a distraction until she came back?" Tears hovered at the corners of Elinor's eyes. "I'm not just another whore. You can't have your way with me and toss coins at my feet when you're done."

"Elinor—" Bastian reached out, but she knocked his arm away. "You know I don't feel that way about you. Please don't say it."

"You won't let Connor kill Jarrett because you think it'll make Tressa mad. The Holy Ones forbid we should ever upset poor little Tressa." Elinor stomped a booted foot on the floor. When Bastian didn't immediately respond, Elinor pushed past the two men and ran out of the throne room.

Bastian wanted to run after Elinor. He wanted to tell her he cared for her very deeply. He wanted to reassure her that he didn't have those feelings for Tressa anymore, but a very angry Connor still stood in front of him, ready to kill a man who might yet be redeemed.

Tressa sat quietly at the table, her eyes wide.

"I won't let you kill him, Connor. Even if I have to stand between the two of you and take the first blow." Bastian drew up to his full height, standing taller than Connor. "Give it some time. Let the mages in the Black try to help him. I swear to you," Bastian laid a hand on Connor's shoulder, "if Jarrett cannot be redeemed, you will draw first blood."

"And last," Connor said. "I will rip his limbs from his body. I will tear his skin from his bones. I will devour every last bite of him."

Connor turned on one foot, leaving Bastian and Tressa alone in the throne room. Bastian squared his shoulders, and left as well, closing the double doors behind him. Tressa could take care of herself. He needed to find Elinor.

Chapter 31

Tressa smiled at the guards. They stepped to the side, allowing her to enter Jarrett's room. She hadn't given them permission to let anyone else through without her say. Not even the healers in the room next door. She shut the door behind her. The shuffle of the guards' feet outside the door told her they were back in place. Good. These men hadn't been in the Black Guard with her, but they were soldiers who respected that she was. Or had been. Nothing in the Blue was as it had been.

Jarrett lay in bed, asleep. His chest rose and fell with each gentle breath. Here he seemed at peace. Not the man she'd encountered on the island.

Tressa sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand in hers. His eyes opened.

"Hi," she said, smiling gently. She wanted to put him at ease, if that was possible.

Jarrett stared at her. "I can't hear you."

Tressa stroked his hair. She nodded.

"I won't ever hear again," he said, refusing to look at Tressa. "After what happened to me..."

Tressa forced her smile to remain wide. Her cheeks ached, and she choked back tears.

"You don't have to pretend for me," Jarrett said. "I know you're faking." He reached up and cupped her cheek. "I'm so, so sorry for what I tried to do to you. On the island, I was confused. I don't really remember..."

Tressa kissed him, silencing his confession. She forgave him. She understood. She had changed in unspeakable ways too. Her lips moved on his, soft and caring.

Jarrett rested his hands on Tressa's shoulders, pushing her away. She gave him one final peck before sitting up again.

"Something has a hold on me. I can still feel it in my mind. It's back there. Watching." Jarrett sat up. "You should leave."

Tressa lay on the bed next to Jarrett, resting an arm and a leg on his body. "No," she whispered.

"I heard that," Jarrett said. "More importantly, I understood it. Try again."

Tressa took a deep breath and puckered her lips. If he could hear when someone directly whispered into the hole in the side of his head, then all was not lost. Jarrett wouldn't have to push her away. She mustered up the courage to say what she was thinking. "I love you."

Jarrett lay still, not responding. Tressa wondered if he had heard her. Maybe the last time was pure luck.

He rolled on his side, looking her in the eyes. "I love you, too." Jarrett kissed her, his lips hungry. His hands roamed her body, resting just below her breasts. "But I've lost my ears. Aren't you disgusted by my appearance?"

Tressa tilted Jarrett's head so she could see the wounded part of his head. No, it wasn't beautiful. Part of her felt a bit of revulsion, but that was only a reaction to the horror of what had been done to him. Soon she knew she wouldn't even notice a difference. He was Jarrett, and she loved him for more than his looks. "I could turn into a dragon at any moment. I'm as uncontrollable as Henry was. You could be kissing me, and the next thing you know, I could be a giant reptile with a forked tongue."

"Sexy," Jarrett said, winking. He leaned in, kissing her again, this time with a fervor. Her arms wrapped around his trunk and her hands slowly made their way down to the waist of his pants. One hand dipped, squeezing that beautiful arse she'd seen through the bushes all that time ago when she'd spied on him after he bathed in the pond with the other men from the Black Guard. Before he knew she was a woman.

Despite their time apart, despite all they'd been through, Tressa knew she'd been right to tell Jarrett she loved him. This was real. It had the potential to last. She could almost picture them older, surrounded by grandchildren, living in a modest cottage on the outskirts of the forest.

Tressa laid her head on Jarrett's shoulder, her lips close to where his ear had been. "There are mages in the Black who might be able to help you with this magic surrounding you. We'll go there tomorrow."

Jarrett nodded. "Tomorrow," he said. "Our future begins then."

"No," she said, "it began long ago, when we entered a battlefield, determined to win a spot in the Black Guard. The same man trained us. Your father helped us both gain entry by teaching us all he knew." Tressa's heart ached for Leo, the man she'd met by chance in a pub. He'd seen through her disguise as a simple barmaid and helped her craft a far more deadly one as a male warrior. She'd loved him fast and hard, more than she'd ever loved another father figure.

"It almost sounds like you think we were meant to be," Jarrett said,

his finger tracing a squiggly line on her abdomen.

"I was drawn to your father," Tressa said. "It is no surprise I was drawn to you too. You are so much like him, Jarrett. Leo was brave and honorable. Handsome and forthright. He was kind to your uncle —"

Jarrett sprang up. "Uncle? What do you mean, uncle?" He looked hard at Tressa, then turned his head so he could hear her.

"Your uncle. That's how I met your father. I was working in your uncle's tavern and inn."

Jarrett looked back at her again. "I have an uncle? Here? In Ashoom? I didn't know." He rested his head in his hands. "I wouldn't want to meet him looking like this."

Tressa thought of Ira. His messy appearance. His overwhelming frustration with life. She doubted Ira would care much whether Jarrett had two ears, one ear, or no ears. His wife, however, would be a pleasure to see again. Tressa had instantly liked her.

Tressa tapped Jarrett's shoulder. He looked up at her, then cocked his head. "After we get this spell on you sorted out, we will visit your uncle. Though I want to warn you, don't expect him to be enthusiastic about meeting you. He's not like your father. Life has beaten him down."

Jarrett nodded. "Yes, after I'm better." He smiled, genuine and true. The same smile Tressa had seen so many other times.

"Now," Tressa said, kissing Jarrett's shoulder, "you must be hungry. I know I'm famished. Should I hunt down some food for us?"

Jarrett rubbed his stomach. "I am hungry, now that you mention it." He climbed out of bed.

Tressa touched Jarrett's hand to get his attention. "There are two guards outside your door, and you must stay here until we are sure you are no longer under the thrall of whatever captured you on that island."

Jarrett's eyes were sad but understanding. "I can still feel something back there. It's quiet, but it's there."

"And there's one other thing," Tressa said. "Connor wants to kill you."

"Why?" Jarrett asked. "I remember being at camp with them, but the rest is a blur until you rescued me from the island. What did I do?"

Tressa took a deep breath. This wouldn't be easy for Jarrett to hear. She laid a hand on his arm. "You killed all but one of the dragon babies. According to Connor, Bastian, and Elinor, you were heartless. Bloodthirsty."

Jarrett walked away and looked out the window, his hands on the rocky sill. "I would want to kill me too." He turned back to Tressa. "Is there any chance they will ever forgive me?"

Tressa wanted to say yes. She wanted to assure Jarrett they could all move on from this. But she'd seen the look in Connor's eyes. He wanted Jarrett's head and if she didn't play things just right, there was a chance she'd be unable to stop Connor from acting on his rage.

"I'll be back soon," she said. It was all she could muster given the circumstances. She knocked on the door, then opened it. The guards stood ready, their swords drawn.

"It's okay," Tressa said. "I'm just going to scrounge up some dinner. Keep an eye on him, will you?"

The guards nodded and let her pass. Before Tressa closed the door, she saw Jarrett sink into the chair, weeping.

Chapter 32

Tressa banged on the doors to Bastian's chambers. "Where is he?" she yelled, furious.

The doors swung open. Elinor stood inside, her arms crossed. Tressa looked over the healer's head and saw Bastian hurriedly putting on a pair of pants, his face flushed. She looked at Elinor again. The shoulders of her chemise were crooked and the ties undone.

"Bastian is right here, Tressa. What do you want?" Elinor tapped a bare foot on the floor.

"I'm not talking about Bastian," Tressa said, her face red as she dragged her hands through her hair. "I'm looking for Jarrett. I left him to get some food, and when I came back, he was gone. The guards were knocked out cold."

Elinor's eyes widened. She spun around and rushed across the room, grabbing a dress and pulling it over her head. Bastian tugged on a shirt.

"I cannot believe this," Bastian said. "Two guards should have been enough. Especially since everyone in the castle promised they'd leave him alone for now. Even Connor."

"It wasn't Connor," Elinor said. "If he said he wouldn't, then he wouldn't. Connor is the most honorable of us all."

Bastian gave Elinor a strange look, one Tressa couldn't quite decipher. Whatever it was, she didn't care. She was beyond caring about Bastian's new relationship.

Tressa barreled past Elinor. "We have to find Jarrett. Something still has a hold over him. Until we can get him to a competent mage, he cannot be allowed around anyone other than us. He's too fragile."

"We'll help you find him," Bastian said. He glanced at Elinor.

Tressa fought back a snort. When she and Bastian were together, he had done as he pleased. He never looked to her for permission. This Elinor had quite a hold over him. Tressa wasn't sure how she felt about that. It was one thing if he was happy. It was quite another if he was under the healer's thumb. She shook her head. None of that mattered now. Only Jarrett.

"Yes, we will help," Elinor said. "But we have to deliver the

children to Hutton's Bridge tomorrow. We will help you as best as we can tonight. That's all."

Tressa didn't want to search on her own, so she'd take whatever help she could get. "Thank you."

"Let's go." Bastian rushed out the room, Elinor on his heels and Tressa bringing up the rear.

They traversed the castle quickly to Jarrett's room. The two guards were sitting on the floor, woozy and a little embarrassed.

"What can you tell me?" Bastian asked, squatting down next to them.

The first guard rubbed his head. "I don't remember. I must have hit my head on the way down."

"Me too," the other guard said.

"Neither of them remembers anything," Elinor said. "Magic. Jarrett escaped on his own."

"Maybe," Tressa answered, joining Bastian on the floor. "Or maybe someone wanted us to believe that." She ran a finger along the floor. "See this scuff mark? It's heading into the room, not out. Someone did this. Were the two of you taken by surprise?" she asked the guards.

They exchanged glances.

"Well?" Bastian asked. His cheeks puffed out. Tressa knew that look. Frustration. Annoyance.

"Okay, fine," the guard on the right said. The other guard punched his arm, but it didn't stop him from confessing. "There was a woman with black hair. She ... she propositioned us. Told us to wait in the room next door. That she'd be right in. And we fell for it. We weren't here."

"What?" Tressa screamed. If they'd told her that in the first place, she wouldn't have bothered Bastian and Elinor. She knew exactly who the guard was talking about.

"We were only gone a few minutes," the second guard insisted. "She changed her mind."

"When we got back, the door was open and the man inside was gone," the first guard said, his head hanging down.

"How did you get injured?" Elinor asked.

"We didn't," the second said under his breath. "We faked it."

Tressa threw her arms in the air. "Idiots. All of them. No wonder I made it into the Black Guard. These were the type of men I competed against. Cowards. So many cowards here."

"You have to understand! We were as sheltered as the people in Hutton's Bridge. The fog cut us off from the rest of the Dragonlands. We had no reason to train hard..."

But Tressa turned on one heel and stalked away. She had no interest in listening to their pathetic excuses. She headed for Fi's room,

not far away.

Tressa knocked as hard as she could. The door swung open. Tressa ventured in "Fi?"

There was no answer.

"Is she here?" Elinor slipped in the room and stood next to Tressa.

"No." Bastian said. "She's not, but she left something for you." He strode over to the table. A note stood folded, the ink on the parchment spelled out Tressa's name. Bastian handed it to Tressa.

She unfolded the parchment, her hands trembling.

I took Jarrett to the Ruins. I'll find a cure for him, I promise you. Go to Hutton's Bridge and protect the children. I knew you'd refuse to do it, so I did this for your own good. Jarrett is safe with me, just as you were. I swear I will not hurt him.

"They're gone. She thought it would be better for me to help you two with the children." Tressa crumbled the parchment in her hand and tossed it onto Fi's bed.

Bastian and Elinor stood silent, neither offering an opinion.

"I won't go back to Hutton's Bridge," Tressa said. She felt sick. No one would get her back there. They'd have to do it by force.

"You don't have to," Bastian said. He reached out to put a hand on her arm, then pulled back.

"What will you do, then?" Elinor asked. Her tone had softened.

"I'm not sure," Tressa said. She sank down on Fi's bed, looking up at Bastian and Elinor. "Where should I go?"

"You could stay here. Relax?" Bastian shrugged his shoulders.

Elinor elbowed him in the stomach. "I don't know you well, Tressa, but I have a feeling you don't want to relax."

"You're right." Tressa sat up straight. "I can't just sit here while a war brews. I know what I need to do."

"What?" Bastian asked.

Tressa jumped off the bed, pacing. "I could go there, talk to them, ask for their help." She slapped her head. "I can't believe I didn't think of it before." Tressa bent over and hugged Elinor. "Thank you both. I'm sorry I interrupted you for this. Go back to whatever you were doing."

The blush returned to Bastian's face. "Where are you going?"

"It's better you don't know," Tressa said. "If the war comes to you and you're taken, they can't torture you into telling them where I went."

"Smart," Elinor said. "And appreciated."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Bastian said. "You're a wonder, Tressa. Truly. Back in Hutton's Bridge, I never would have thought you'd end up like this."

"It certainly isn't the future I predicted for myself," Tressa said. "I can't complain, though. I always wanted out of the fog. And even

though we lost each other," she reached up, touching Bastian's cheek, "I think we've gained far more beyond the fog."

Elinor smiled, her shoulders relaxing.

"This is goodbye, then?" Bastian asked.

"For now." Tressa winked at him. "We seem to keep running into each other. Take care and keep the children safe."

"We will," Elinor said.

"We have plenty of horses," Bastian said. "Please take one."

"Thanks for the offer," Tressa said, grinning, "but I have another way to travel."

While recounting her adventures, Tressa purposely hadn't told them she could change in to a dragon yet. She knew Bastian harbored a mistrust of dragons. Despite overcoming his anxiety for Connor's sake, Tressa worried telling Bastian the truth might damage whatever was left of their fragile friendship.

She took her leave of the castle and ran to the edge of the town of Ashoom and jumped. There was no more fear left in her, just a trust that her body would do exactly what it needed to survive. She thrust her arms out to the side and took flight, a little bag of clothes dangling from her ankle.

Bastian stood at the window, watching the sun come up through the trees. Yellow beams broke through the branches, bathing his room in morning's light. He wondered where Tressa had gone and if he'd ever see her again. As for Jarrett, Bastian was glad the man was gone. Hopefully he'd never show his face around Bastian, Connor, or Elinor again. After what he'd put them through, Jarrett was lucky they'd let him live.

"Morning," Elinor said from behind, wrapping her arms around his stomach. She'd apologized last night for her behavior, admitting to a nasty bout of jealousy.

Meanwhile, Bastian had tried to reassure her he no longer had any interest in Tressa. Not like that. He hoped he'd proven it to her last night.

"Good morning," Bastian said. "Are you ready for the trek back to Hutton's Bridge?"

There were too many children to ride on Connor's back. He'd be exhausted by the end of the day, and he was their only protection. Instead they were going to walk. Horses would pull carts carrying their supplies and any young children who were having trouble walking.

"I'm ready," Elinor said. "Once we get everyone settled in, what are we going to do?"

"Come back here," Bastian said. "I hate to leave Farah again, but someone has to be eyes and ears outside the fog. If danger is headed their way, I want to be ready."

Elinor walked to the wardrobe. She chose a light brown dress and slipped it over her head, shimmying it down her body. "I hope it's okay if I come with you."

"I hoped you would," Bastian said. He pulled on his pants and a shirt. "Now let's find some food to break our fast. Then we'll gather up the children and head out."

They made their way to the kitchen. When he took the throne, Bastian had kept the cooks on, promising to pay them the same Stacia had. In return, Bastian and Elinor didn't require any special attention.

They ate with the cooks in the expansive kitchen, taking their food with anyone who worked in the castle. Bastian wasn't comfortable with being their leader, and he certainly wasn't going to ask them to treat him like a king.

"The bread is piping hot," Lily, one of the cooks, said when Bastian and Elinor sat at the table. "We were up half the night baking extra loaves for you to take to the village."

"Thank you so much, Lily," Bastian said. He tore a chunk off the bread. Steam rose, dancing in the air. "I know the children will appreciate it."

"Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you." Lily continued chopping apple slices without looking up at Bastian. "I'd like to go with you. Out there, behind the fog, the healers and Hazel will have enough to do keeping the children occupied. Mayhap I can be their cook. Jude here," she pointed at the quiet young woman next to her, "is more than qualified to continue cooking for you and Elinor."

Bastian scratched his chin. "Are you sure? I don't know how long it'll take until it's safe to get rid of the fog. You could be stuck in there for a very long time."

"It's okay." Lily shrugged. "I've got nothing here. I'm happy to help."

"That's wonderful," Elinor said. "In some ways I envy you. To get away from the threat of war and constant upheaval."

"Someday," Bastian said, setting his hand on Elinor's and squeezing it.

Elinor smiled at him. "Yes, someday."

A loud whoop preceded the children. They ran into the kitchen, searching for food.

A boy stuck his hand in a bowl of chunks of bread and Lily slapped his hand with a wooden spoon. "Mind your manners," she said. But a smile played at the corner of her mouth.

Yes, she would enjoy going with the children. Bastian felt better about telling her she could join them. The children of Hutton's Bridge needed all the caring adults they could find.

Elinor reached out for Hazel, and they smiled at each other. The two had become quick friends.

"Where is Connor?" Elinor asked Hazel.

She frowned. "He's outside in the courtyard with Fotia and Vatra. His other children need him, too." She glanced over at her two boys.

Elinor laid her hand on Hazel's arm. "Vatra and Fotia are helpless still."

"Maybe once Connor understands I'm willing to make our family one, dragons included, then he'll trust me again. I've been asking to spend time with Fotia and Vatra, but as of yet he hasn't allowed it."

Elinor laughed. "Vatra bites. That's probably why."

Hazel's eyes danced. "Then that explains the marks on his hands. When I asked, he refused to tell me where they came from. I just have to show him I'm not afraid."

"If he thinks he's protecting you, then that's a good sign. Men like to protect women," Elinor said, winking at Bastian.

"All right, that's enough." Bastian grabbed Elinor's elbow and tugged her toward the door. "Enough twittering for now. We have to be on our way soon." He turned to Hazel. "Make sure the children are well fed."

Hazel saluted Bastian. "Yes, sir." Then she laughed. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to you being so commanding. You've always been the strong, but silent man."

Bastian shrugged. "We've all changed."

Hazel's eyes clouded over. "True. But for the better. We're all stronger."

Bastian nodded, then left the kitchen with Elinor.

Not much later, the large group assembled in the courtyard. The children played and yelled, excited to be going home again. Hazel, Lily, and the two healers rounded the kids up, trying to keep them focused. The townspeople of Ashoom offered them gifts, though Bastian felt they were just happy to see them leaving. Despite having a tyrant for a ruler, they'd lived a fairly quiet, simple life until Bastian, Tressa, and Connor came to their town. Now the threat of war hung over them.

Connor stood off to the side, Fotia and Vatra prancing around him. Bastian had decided it was for the best if he didn't leave in dragon form. Let the people of Ashoom think their dragon was still in the castle, watching out for them.

"Are you ready?" Elinor asked Bastian.

"Should I give some kind of speech before we go?" he asked.

"No, let's just leave. Few here will care. I think they will be more distressed over losing three of their healers than seeing you go," she said.

Bastian looked through the crowd. He'd lived there for a quite a while now, and didn't recognize anyone. He had been too busy running all over the Dragonlands chasing a ghost, a life that was forever lost. Bastian glanced at Elinor and smiled. He'd found a woman here, one who had helped him move on from Tressa. Bastian smiled, then looked up. His eyes locked with a woman he knew. The woman he'd spent the night with when Tressa rejected him for Jarrett.

The whore winked at him. She licked her lips, then waved.

Bastian didn't return the gesture.

Her eyes clouded over, then she pointed down at her stomach and rubbed it.

No. No. She couldn't be. His eyes grew wide with fear.

She nodded, her hair spilling over her shoulders.

He'd gotten her pregnant. Bastian had been so lost that night over losing Tressa that he couldn't even remember if he'd thought to use a lambskin sheath. He'd been too busy drowning his sorrows between that woman's legs.

He looked back at the children. His daughter Farah played dolls with another little girl. So she'd no longer be an only child. Part of him was happy, but another part horrified. How would he explain to his daughter that he'd had a child with a whore?

Elinor tapped Bastian's shoulder. "Ready?"

How could he explain it to Elinor?

Chapter 34

They arrived in Hutton's Bridge just as the sun was falling behind the treetops.

"We made it." Bastian leaned against the door to his old cottage.

"This was your home?" Elinor asked.

Bastian nodded. His time with Vinya flashed in his memory, but he pushed those images away. For Farah's sake, he'd never speak poorly of his dead wife. It did no justice to the living or the dead to rehash her constant verbal abuse. Farah would grow up loved. It was all she would ever know. And his other child, the one with the whore ... well he'd deal with that later. If the baby was even his.

"Should we head back to Ashoom tonight?" Elinor asked as they walked toward the town hall.

Bastian looked up at the sky. The stars sparkled above the forest bathing the small village in soft light. The same stars he'd gazed at his whole life. Unchanging. Static. Just like Hutton's Bridge. He no longer felt this cottage in front of him was his home. Bastian wasn't sure he could call any place home now.

"No, I think we should spend at least one night here," he said. "Just to make sure everyone gets settled. Once we reinstate the fog, we won't be back until it's time to take it down again."

"Bastian!" Hazel waved at him from across the town square, where she stood in the doorway of the village hall, her oldest son peeking out from between her legs.

"Is there enough space for everyone?" Bastian asked. They'd decided all the children and their caretakers would live together in the village hall, which used to be the old inn before the fog. The children would share rooms and the adults would sleep on the ground floor, to assure none of them ran out during the night.

"There is." Hazel nodded. She reached down, ruffled her son's hair, and then pushed him backward. "Go on inside." She looked at Bastian again. "Farah's been asking if she can go home with you. I thought perhaps it would be best if you talked to her and told her your plans."

"Of course," Bastian said. "I meant to anyway." He hadn't thought of it, actually. Parenting was never something that had come easily to

him, and on the rare occasions he did have a thought, Vinya would squelch it. It was her idea, or it wasn't allowed. Eventually, he'd given up. He let Vinya make all the decisions and only interacted with Farah when it was necessary.

He was a terrible father, and he knew it.

"Elinor," he said, "do you mind if I do this alone?"

She squeezed Bastian's hand. "Of course not. I completely understand."

Bastian smiled at Elinor, then followed Hazel into the former village hall. His heart pounded. Since the children had been rescued, he'd only spent small, stolen moments with Farah. Even after Vinya had died in the forest outside Hutton's Bridge, he'd left Farah's care to others. It was a wonder the girl even wanted to speak to him.

"Dada!" Farah ran into Bastian's outstretched arms. She snuggled into his shoulder.

He squeezed her tightly. Farah stepped back. He looked into her face, really looked at her for the first time in her three years, and noticed something he hadn't before. Farah had his green eyes and his strong cheekbones and chin. Though she hadn't inherited his red hair, Farah looked almost exactly like him.

"Hazel said you wanted to ask me a question, baby girl. What is it?" Bastian tucked a lock of blond hair behind her ear.

"I'm not a baby." Farah pouted, her hands on her hips.

Bastian held back laughter. "I'm sorry. Big girl, what did you want to ask?"

Farah grinned, her smile melting his heart even more. "I want you to stay here. Want to go home." Her speech lisped slightly, her tongue darting in and out of a gap between her top teeth.

"We can't. Not yet. There are still bad guys out there to fight. I have to help drive them away so we can be safe." Bastian watched the light go out of her eyes. "But I promise I'll be back as soon as possible, okay?"

"Okay!" Farah's smile lit up again.

Bastian didn't have any guarantees he'd be back soon, or that they'd ever be safe. But he refused to take away her hope.

Farah slipped her little hand into his calloused palm. She leaned in close, her lips close to his ear. "Just make sure that mean old lady isn't there."

"Who?" Bastian asked, surprised.

"That old lady who used to live with Tressa," Farah whispered. "She scares me."

Bastian sat back on his heels, confused. "You mean Sophia?"

Farah nodded.

"Sweetie, she died many moons ago."

Farah shook her head, disagreeing. "She was there. With the red dragons. Mean old lady."

Bastian hugged Farah again. She must have had nightmares while being held captive. And she was so young and easily confused. He remembered having nightmares as a child, and sometimes they had seemed so real. Bastian kissed Farah's brow. "I promise I won't let the mean old lady get you. Now, go play. I'm spending the night here, but I'm heading back to the castle in the morning."

"Okay, Dada." Farah ran off, grabbing another girl's hand and giggling.

Bastian sat on the floor, his back against the wall. The children ran, playing tag in the large common room, not a care in the world. They were just happy to be back in their village. Their home.

Elinor sat next to Bastian. "Your daughter is very cute," she said. "She looks a lot like you."

"She does, doesn't she?"

"I wonder what our babies would look like."

Bastian stared at Elinor. "You're not..."

"No!" She laughed. "It was just a question. Not a hint."

Bastian let out a sigh of relief.

"You're not ready for that, are you?" she asked, her voice quiet.

"No," Bastian said. "I'm not. Maybe someday."

"Maybe us?" she asked, nudging Bastian with her elbow.

"Maybe." He nudged her back.

Elinor rested her head on his shoulder.

He liked her. Maybe he loved her. But now was the wrong time for love. Certainly the worst time for a commitment.

"Where do you want to sleep tonight?" she asked him, followed by a long yawn.

It had been a tiring day. Even some of the children were voluntarily winding down, Farah among them. Her eyelids drooped as she played with a cornhusk doll.

"Here," Bastian said. He didn't want to take Elinor to his cottage where he'd lived with Vinya. It felt wrong somehow and most of the nights he'd spent at the forge had included a random woman. He refused to take her to the meadow where he'd lain with Tressa so many times. No, his relationship with Elinor didn't have a place in Hutton's Bridge yet. "I think it's best if we stay with everyone else. Just in case."

"I understand." Elinor patted his hand and stood. "I'm going to get my pack and settle down over there. You're welcome to join me, but I understand if you don't, with Farah around."

Elinor had a point. It might upset and confuse Farah if she saw him sleeping next to another woman. Back at the castle, he hadn't let her

know he shared his chambers with Elinor. "I'd sleep with Connor, but I think he's still outside with Fotia and Vatra," Bastian said. "Perhaps my place is near the door, as a guard."

Elinor walked away, her hips swinging with each step. Bastian regretted he'd be spending a night without his arms wrapped around her waist, his fingers dipping dangerously low... Bastian shook his head. Not now.

He stood, and caught Hazel's eye. He pointed outside, indicating he had to use the privy. Really, he needed to get away from Elinor. Hazel nodded, and Bastian slipped out the door. He'd be back soon enough, ready to settle in for the night.

He glanced up at the sky again, the stars winking. Without thinking, he took off in the direction of Tressa's cottage. On the other side of the village, close to the forest, her cottage had always been away from everyone else's. He'd never thought to ask if that was Sophia's family's cottage when the fog fell or if she'd taken it for her own later.

He tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. It was yet another mystery surrounding Tressa. And now there was a new mystery: why Tressa's great-grandmother haunted his daughter's nightmares.

Tressa flew until her wings could no longer support her. She glided down to the ground, her feet landing solidly on the grass. She changed into human form and adjusted her leather top.

She'd flown through the boundaries of the Meadowlands, experiencing nothing more than a tingle when she passed through the magical barrier that kept the Green trapped inside. She was determined to add to the numbers fighting for freedom in the Dragonlands.

Tressa hadn't encountered any other dragons on her way to the Meadowlands. Perhaps they'd all scrambled back to their homelands to lick their wounds after the last battle.

Tressa knew leaving the army behind wouldn't be looked upon kindly, but it wasn't her fault she had followed Jarrett's siren song. He'd wielded black magic against her. She was lucky he hadn't destroyed her. If it weren't for Fi, Tressa would certainly be dead on that island, and Jarrett lost to whatever held him. Tressa hoped Fi wouldn't be treated too harshly when she arrived back at the Ruins of Ebon with Jarrett.

Tressa had flown northwest, looking for the town she'd seen on the map. The Outpost. It was the largest town in the Meadowlands, although it wasn't where the royalty resided, Tressa knew what she was about to propose was risky, and it was unlikely to be met with much enthusiasm. Still, she needed the Green's support.

All her friends were doing so much to return peace to the Dragonlands. Bastian and Connor were keeping the children of Hutton's Bridge safe. Fi was going to find a way to sever the dark magic that held onto Jarrett. Tressa wouldn't sit idly by, doing nothing, while the rest of them found a way to help.

She knew she'd already be facing the wrath of her grandmother for deserting during the battle. Perhaps she could make up for it in the Meadowlands.

"Can I help you?" asked the guard at the gates. A tall wooden wall surrounded the town, standing in stark contrast to the tall grass surrounding it. She hadn't realized The Outpost was fortified.

"I'm here looking for a family. There are three children: Margret, Peyter, and Edmond. I think they live on a farm west of here, but I wasn't sure where to look." Tressa stood tall, attempting to appear commanding.

"Don't know 'em," the guard said. "Now go back where you belong. Out of the Meadowlands. We don't want your kind here. I saw you fly in. I know what you are."

"I know what the Red and Yellow did to you," Tressa said. "I'm here to help."

"Help?" The man laughed, his belly shaking. "We needed help the last couple years, and where has the Black been? Hiding! Cowards. We don't need you or your help." He turned his back on her, slamming the gate in Tressa's face.

Tressa jumped into the air, her wings appearing faster than she could remove her shirt. It hung in tatters from her wing. She cursed. Now she wouldn't be able to change back into a human without baring her breasts. It wasn't how she wanted to present herself to the people of the Meadowlands.

Beating her wings, and aided by the help of the breeze, Tressa rose straight up in the air and flew over the wall. Countless people milled in the streets below.

A child glanced up at the sky, shielding her eyes with her hand, and pointing. Everyone around her looked up. The man who had slammed the gate on Tressa shook his head. People scuttled around like ants. Five burst into the sky, taking their sparkling emerald dragon form. They flew up, circling Tressa.

Can you hear me? she asked them. Her neck whipped from side to side, looking at the other dragons. Their slitted eyes narrowed, glaring back at her.

Yes, one of them responded.

Tressa couldn't tell which, and none of them gave an indication.

I'm here to ask for your help, Tressa said. *I am from the Charred Barrens. We're fighting against the Red and Yellow to bring freedom to all of the Dragonlands.*

The five dragons swayed and twirled, flying around Tressa in a dizzying circle. She flapped her wings slowly, maintaining her position—and reserving her strength in case they decided to attack.

I do not know how to bring down the barrier, but if I can find someone who knows how, will you be ready? Will you fight with us? she asked.

A dragon with golden spots on its wings broke into the circle. The other four continued their dance.

Will we be allowed to live as we choose? We want to offer the dragon form to all who want it. The voice was deep and sonorous.

Yes, she answered.

And who are you to make such a promise? he asked. His tail lazily batted back and forth. Three sharp spikes lined his reptilian skin.

I am free, just as you are. I will not tell you what to do. At the same time, I will not tell you what not to do. If we can defeat the Yellow and the Red, all will be allowed to live their lives as they choose. At least she hoped that was the truth. It was what she was fighting for. Freedom from war. Freedom from tyranny. A chance to live life on her own terms.

The spotted dragon flew back into formation. The Green dragons flew around Tressa in an unending circle, mouth following tail. Then the circle broke, and the five flew to the ground, landing in the center of the town square and returning to their human forms. All five waved at her.

She again cursed herself for tearing her top, but despite her mistake, she needed their support. Tressa dove to the ground, changing. She held the tatters from her shirt across her chest.

"Goodness, me," a woman's voice said from behind her. Tressa felt something drape over her shoulders. She grasped the linen, pulling the cloak tightly, and letting the tattered leather top fall to the ground.

Tressa turned around. "Thank you," she said with a smile.

The toothless woman cocked her head and winked. "We've all done it, sweetie. I already sent my daughter to get a shirt for you from our cottage. It won't match your pants, but it will cover you."

A voice cleared behind her. Tressa turned back to the semi-circle of three men and two women.

"Do you truly mean what you say?" a man asked. His brown hair fell across his brow. Freckles dotted the bridge of his nose. He couldn't have been much older than Tressa, yet he spoke for all of them.

"I do," Tressa said. "I know what the Red and Yellow did to you. I've been to the Meadowlands before and three of your children escorted me to the border, asking me to help set you free. They insisted I was a dragon and could do it, but at the time I didn't know I had dragon blood in me. I've only recently learned to change. I promised them if I ever learned how to free your people, I would."

"And you know how?" a blond woman with pale skin asked. She set her hand on the shoulder of the freckled man.

Tressa shook her head. "I do not. I was hoping one of you could tell me. I'll do whatever it takes."

"We don't know either," the freckled man said. The others shook their heads. "If we knew, we'd have lifted the barrier long ago. They used mages, and though we are plentiful with dragons—" laughter spread through the crowd, "—we have no mages."

"If I can find someone to break the barrier, will you fight with us?" Tressa asked. "Honestly, the war may come to you whether you want

it or not."

"It is true," the woman said to the freckled man. She gazed at Tressa, her green eyes piercing. "I am sorry. We haven't introduced ourselves. I am Blythe. This is Renny," she said, glancing at the freckled man. "The others are Valdus, Wyman, and Sage." Blythe looked at Renny. "Should we tell her?"

He nodded. "Come." Renny held his arm out. "We have something to show you."

Chapter 36

The toothless woman tossed Tressa the shirt she'd sent her daughter to fetch. Tressa pulled it over the cloak, shoving her arms through the sleeves, then pulled the cloak down. She handed it back to the woman with a smile and a whispered thanks. Renny led Tressa away from the town center. The other four followed Tressa while the rest of the city went back to its day.

They approached a large barn. Renny motioned Valdus over. Together, they lifted a heavy wooden bar from two iron brackets.

Renny grabbed a torch from inside the barn, lighting it on the brazier just outside. Tressa followed him in the huge doorway, orange and yellow light bouncing off giant structures made of silver.

"We were afraid war would come to us," Blythe said. "So we decided to be prepared."

Tressa held out a hand, resting it on the cool steel. Her fingertips followed the edges, coming to a point at the end. "It looks like—"

"It is. Armor. For dragons," Renny said. He clapped Wyman on the shoulder. "Wyman and his men in the forge made it for us. They started the day after the barrier was raised."

"Tis true," Wyman said. "Every last scrap of metal we could salvage was melted and used to create this armor. It was our only protection. Without the ability to send our people to other lands for training with mages, we were left defenseless."

Blythe nodded. "Everyone thought we were changing our people into dragons to prepare for a battle. That's not why we did it."

"Then why did you?" Tressa asked. "It's not a comfortable process to undergo. I've had a lot of trouble adjusting." She picked up a series of steel spikes with a leather belt hanging from the sides. Imagining what it would have been like to have armor like this during the battle with the Red, Tressa couldn't help but wonder if they'd have lasted longer than they had. Instead, many had lost their lives. Too many to count.

"We did it so we would all be equals. And if someone didn't want to be changed, we left them alone." Blythe sat on a nearby bench. "The last thing anyone wanted was to take away the freedom of choice."

"But what about the children?" Tressa didn't mean to press, but she wanted to understand their motives better in case she was ever questioned about her association with them. "When I was here last, I met a set of siblings. They told me all babies who aren't born as dragons are changed. None of them had the choice."

Renny turned his back on them, his torch burning low. "You said you could help us. How long will it take for you to be back with someone to set us free?"

"I'm not sure," Tressa said. She eyed Blythe, who had ignored her last question. They weren't telling and she had no leverage to make them talk. Still, the Meadowlands were willing to help her. That mattered most. "I can fly back to the Charred Barrens. It will take me most of the day and into the night to get to their stronghold."

"Interesting," Renny said, leading the way out of the barn and closing the door behind them. Valdus assisted him with putting the bar back down. "We thought the Black dragons were dead."

"We aren't." Tressa marveled at how quickly she'd adjusted to thinking of herself as one of them. Despite living in Hutton's Bridge for the majority of her life, she'd taken on the Black as her new family. She'd never felt at home anywhere. Now, with Fi, Tressa felt she'd finally found a place to call home in that underground city.

"Scouts were sent to the Charred Barrens many, many times over the years. They found nothing. Where were you hiding?" Blythe asked.

Tressa shrugged. If they wanted to keep their secrets about why they turned children, then she would keep the secret of her people.

"I'll be back as soon as possible with someone who can take down the barrier." Tressa held out her hand.

Renny pumped her hand twice. "We look forward to it."

"And you'll fight with us?" she asked.

Blythe smiled. "Absolutely. It's time to teach the Red and Yellow exactly what we think of them for locking us up in here." She laughed, her head tossing back. "It's as if they think we're as dangerous as the people who once lived in Hutton's Bridge."

"Dangerous?" Tressa asked. She'd heard many stories about her town, but this was a first.

Blythe looked at Renny. He nodded. "Tell her."

"Well," Blythe said, "There is a theory in the Meadowlands about Hutton's Bridge. When the fog fell, we were all immediately cut off from Hutton's Bridge. It also kept us from reaching the rest of the Drowned Country without going by boat, which takes a long time from our ports. But one of our men decided to investigate. He returned more than a moon later, beaten, damaged, and on the brink of death. My great-grandmother cared for him, nursing him back to health. While he was recovering, he would have deep, dark

nightmares, where he would scream about a young girl who tortured him in the woods. He swore he never made it to Hutton's Bridge, because he'd been lost in the fog. And he never spoke of this girl when he was awake. It was only in his darkest nightmares when he would speak in his sleep."

"Did he ever say the name of this girl?" Tressa asked, curious. It was unlikely she'd recognize any name they gave her, but still her curiosity won out.

Blythe nodded. "Oh yes, I know her name very well. My great-grandmother told me on her deathbed many years ago. She wanted someone to know, just in case it was important. In case the fog around Hutton's Bridge ever changed. And if the rumors are to be believed, it has."

Tressa raised an eyebrow, waiting for the name.

"The name of the girl who'd nearly killed him was Sophia."

Tressa's eyes snapped wide. "What did you say?"

"Sophia," Blythe said. "Do you recognize the name? It's a common enough name for the time, though not many name their children that anymore. It's very old-fashioned."

"Yes." Tressa gulped. It had to be a coincidence. "I do."

Blythe shrugged. "Anyway, that was a long time ago. I doubt she's still alive, torturing innocent men. She'd have to be positively ancient."

"Well," Tressa said, quickly changing the subject, "I should be off if I want to make it partway to the Charred Barrens before it's too late. I'll be back soon with help."

"I hope so," Renny said. "We're a little anxious to have our lands opened once again."

Tressa jumped into the air, letting the borrowed shirt fall to the ground. She would take nothing from these people until she was sure she could help them. Besides, the less she carried, the faster she could fly. She needed to return to Hutton's Bridge before Bastian asked the woman in the tree to bring back the fog.

Tressa landed in the village square at Hutton's Bridge in the dark of the night. She changed into her human form and took off in a run to her old cottage she'd shared with Granna, covering her naked breasts with folded arms. She quickly slipped into the cottage, closing the door behind her.

Moonlight bathed her old home in white light. Tressa pulled the wardrobe open, donning one of her simple gowns. She sat on her bed, dust puffing out of the mattress. Sneezing, Tressa pounded on it until the dust no longer burst forth. She lay down on the bed, letting exhaustion overcome her. Her heart slowed with each subsequent breath. Her eyes fluttered shut. There was nothing but the silence of the night.

Finally. Peace.

Until a fierce knock broke the quiet.

"Come in," Tressa moaned, her arm over her eyes.

The door rattled. "Tressa, it's me, Bastian. Open the door."

She groaned, getting up from the bed. She looked back at it longingly before opening the door. "I said you could come in."

Bastian and Connor pushed past her, closing the door behind them. "It wouldn't open," Bastian said. "Not for anyone."

Connor lit the candles with a burning stick he carried. When he was done, he shook out the flame and set the stick down on the table.

Tressa rubbed her eyes at the flickering light. All she wanted was a few hours sleep. "Can this wait?"

"No," Connor said. "It can't."

"Okay." Tressa sat on the bed, motioning for them to take chairs. If Connor said it was important, then it must be. "What's going on?"

Ignoring her gesture, Bastian rifled through Granna's bookcases, pulling out books, flipping through them, and placing them back on the shelf.

"Isn't it a bit late to look for something to read?" she asked.

"No one has been able to get in here since you left," Bastian said. "Except once. Udor got in, took a book, and after that the door wouldn't budge."

"It's under a spell," Connor said. "We think your great-grandmother hid something in here."

"I know it's under a spell," Tressa said, stifling a yawn. "Jarrett told me that when we first investigated the village."

Connor glared at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, placing her hand on Connor's arm.

He yanked his arm away. "We couldn't get in. Only you could open the door. Now that you're back, we can search."

"Fine." Tressa rolled her eyes and settled back into her bed, pulling the blanket up to her chin. "Close the door behind you when you're gone." She closed her eyes, but Bastian and Connor's sloppy search kept her awake. Tressa threw the blanket off and sat up.

"What exactly are you looking for?" she asked.

Bastian didn't look away from the bookcase as he explained. "The book Udor took from the cottage was missing a few pages. We need those."

"Why?" Tressa asked. She rubbed her eyes again. Exhaustion couldn't even begin to explain how she felt. Couldn't she get just one night of peace?

"The book told the story of why Hutton's Bridge was surrounded with fog. Yet the story wasn't done and the pages were missing. We need them," Bastian said.

"It's history. Why does it matter now?" she asked

"Are you going to be here in the morning?" Bastian asked pointedly. His eyes locked with hers. "We didn't even know you were stopping here tonight. When Connor mentioned he'd seen a light in the cottage window, we came here immediately. If we come back in the morning, will you be here?"

Tressa pursed her lips. She eyed the two men who'd been her best friends her whole life, who now stood in front of her as strangers. She wanted to help them, but she needed sleep so she could find her way back to the ruins and ask for help with taking down the barrier around the Meadowlands. Then they'd have access to the armor too.

"Give me one good reason to stay."

Bastian looked at Connor, who shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," Bastian said. "Farah said she saw your great-grandmother when the villagers were held captive by the Red. It got me thinking that maybe there's more to this conflict than we thought. If I could find those pages..."

Tressa's shoulders dropped. Another accusation against Granna. The woman was infuriating. Maddening. But evil? Tressa couldn't believe it. There had to be another explanation. "Okay. I'll stay until the pages are found." She stood and set to looking through the bookshelf. Their search quickly came up empty.

"There's nothing here," Tressa said. She sat on the bed next to Connor, laying her head on his shoulder. He stiffened. Tressa popped up. She'd forgotten about how he'd changed. Her feelings for him had remained the same, despite everything that had happened, but he obviously didn't feel the same way about her. It was so strange. Her best friend was alive, but their relationship had shifted. Possibly for good.

"If we had all the pieces to the story, we might be able to understand everything better. Maybe then we'd know why the dragonlords continue to battle one another. And maybe it could help us end the wars." Bastian paced the small cottage, managing only a few steps before the wall forced him to turn again.

"I know what they are fighting over," Tressa said, "but not why. It's the honey."

"The honey?" Connor perked up, his eyes wide. "I don't remember everything, but I do recall working with the bees before we entered the fog. Why would they want the honey?"

"I don't know," Tressa said. "No one will enlighten me either. I think Granna knows..." she trailed off, knowing how that must sound.

"Unfortunately, she's gone and can't answer your questions anymore," Bastian said.

Tressa clenched and unclenched her fists buried in her lap. "Actually..."

"What?" Bastian asked.

Connor looked at her expectantly.

"Granna's not dead," Tressa said.

Bastian's jaw dropped. Connor didn't look surprised, his face calm. Perhaps he understood better than anyone how easy it was to beat death.

"How long have you known?" Bastian asked.

"Not long," Tressa said. "Only after I left Ashoom when I was sick. Fi took me to her. Granna's been in the Black."

"But her body—" Bastian looked at Connor. They had carried her together after her viewing, commending her to the fog. Connor's face remained neutral. Another hole in his memory. "She was dead, Tressa."

"So was I," Connor said, "and yet I'm here."

"That's different," Bastian said. "I didn't hold your cold body in my hands. Trust me, Sophia was dead." Sweat dripped from Bastian's hairline.

Tressa fought the urge to reach out and wrap her arms around him. Even though they'd drifted apart, she had to admit she still loved the man. Not in the same desperate way she had before, though. "I know she was. But there are things the dragons can do that go beyond

anything we were taught as children. The world isn't as we were told."

Bastian took a deep breath. "And that's what I've been trying to tell you. Sophia is withholding information. You have to ask her about the honey."

"You think I haven't?" Tressa asked. She'd asked Granna so many questions, but the only real revelation involved the abortive tea. Tressa looked up at Bastian, her heart hurting. He deserved to know that their attempts to become pregnant had been thwarted. "She wouldn't tell me."

"Maybe she doesn't know?" Connor asked.

Bastian shook his head. "No. She knows. She has to. Otherwise, why all of the secrecy? Why fake her own death? Why take those pages from the book? Why put a spell on the cottage so no one else can enter?"

"I stopped here to sleep tonight. Tomorrow morning I'm headed back to the Ruins. I'll ask Granna while I'm there. This time I'll pressure her more." Tressa wasn't sure it would do any good, though. Granna hadn't appeared interested in sharing much of anything with her. "If I get answers, I'll share them with you as soon as I'm able. I have other tasks to complete too. Promises I've made that I must keep."

Bastian rolled his eyes. She'd made promises to him once, yes. She hadn't kept them, but she didn't think he was suffering. Elinor kept his bed warm now.

"You wouldn't want to break a promise, would you?" he asked, folding his arms over his chest.

Tressa noticed Connor slip out the door. She took a deep breath. It was past time they had this discussion.

"Bastian, when I left you with our parents, I did it for the good of our people. After what happened to Connor, I couldn't let anyone else suffer. I also think, though it's too late to prove it, that my father manipulated me into leaving." She stood, her legs shaking with anger. "I did what I thought was right. I had every intention of coming back to you. But then everything spiraled out of control."

"And you met Jarrett."

"This isn't about Jarrett!" Tressa resisted stomping her foot. Her hands were in fists.

"You could have come with me after the battle in Risos. You chose to stay with him in that bunker under the sand." Bastian's voice cracked. "I waited for you."

"That time." Tressa said it under her breath, but she knew he could hear it—just as she knew he could hear her unspoken accusation. When they were unable to conceive, thanks to Granna, he'd moved on to other women.

Silence hung in the air. Thick. Ugly.

Bastian's shoulders drooped. "I'm sorry. I know. I was younger then. Stupid. I thought we'd never be together, and I didn't think any of the other trysts mattered. If I had thought, even for a moment, that we'd be free of Hutton's Bridge and have a chance to be together again..."

"There are things you don't know," Tressa said, her lips trembling. She rested a hand on her stomach. "I was pregnant with our child. We conceived a baby in the grove where our parents hid."

"Was?" Bastian's hand cupped Tressa's cheek. "What happened?"

"I was poisoned and lost the baby." Tears choked Tressa's throat. "When I stayed in the bunker, I was pregnant."

Bastian's hand dropped. The pained look on his face tortured Tressa.

"I didn't know then, I swear it to you." Tressa grasped Bastian's hands. "I didn't find out until I miscarried. If I had known..."

"Things might be different?" Bastian asked, his voice a whisper.

Tressa looked up at Bastian. The boy she'd loved stood in front of her. His eyes pleaded with her. Asking for what? Forgiveness? Another chance?

Then there was Jarrett. She loved him. She knew that deep down he was the one for her.

"Tressa?" Bastian's hand hovered in the air. Slowly it lowered onto her hair.

Her heart beat fast. Too fast. Fire licked in her belly, all the memories of her past with Bastian flooding back. Standing in this cottage with him felt too familiar.

She took his hand in hers, lowering it slowly away from her face. He held her fingers gently, lacing his though hers.

"Bastian, we shouldn't." It came out as a whisper. "Jarrett. Elinor."

"I can't stop wanting you," he said.

She ventured a glance down and his body echoed what he'd told her. Despite her attempts to think of Jarrett, to push away all of the feelings and memories she shared with Bastian, she couldn't stop. Not here. Not in this place.

Tressa stood on her tiptoes, her lips landing on Bastian's. Her body melted against his, feeling all the familiar contours as his hand fumbled at her top.

"Are you sure?" he asked, pulling back for a moment.

Tressa grasped his face, pulling him closer. She jumped, wrapping her legs around his waist. His hands found their way to her bottom as he stumbled toward the bed, laying her down gently.

Chapter 38

Tressa rolled out of Bastian's arms and sat up, her eyes squinting into rays from the rising sun. She looked down at his face, his eyes lightly shut and his mouth open, a small snore dropping from his lips. After making love, they'd sleepily agreed it would be the last time. They both had something they'd needed to get out of their systems. Tressa had no interest in going back to Bastian, and he seemed to understand that.

Her thoughts turned to Jarrett. She wasn't sure if she felt what she'd just done was a betrayal. Her heart still loved Jarrett. Nothing had changed. This was a moment stolen from the past. Irrelevant to her future.

"Bastian," she said, nudging his arm.

He grunted, wiped his nose, then opened his eyes. "Tressa." He smiled, followed by panic in his eyes. "Tressa!" He sat up, the blanket dripping precariously down his naked hips.

"It's okay," she said. "I was going to head south. I thought you should leave before me, just in case the spell keeps you trapped in here."

"Good idea." He gathered the blanket around his waist. "Last night was—"

"It was last night," Tressa said. She turned her back, giving him time to get his clothes on. "We're adults, Bastian. We don't have to make more of this than it was." Tressa waited, listening to him pull up his pants. She turned around just as he was pulling his shirt over his head. One glance at his taut stomach told her the truth. What happened last night was simply a mirror of their past. Not their present. Not their future. She still loved Jarrett.

Bastian rubbed his chin. "There is one thing." He paused, but he didn't need to finish.

"Elinor," Tressa said. She rested a hand on Bastian's shoulder. "Don't worry, I won't tell her. It would only hurt her, and that wasn't our intention."

"No," Bastian said. "It's just that, I really like Elinor. Genuinely."

Tressa smiled. "I'm glad. You deserve to be happy, too."

"What about Jarrett?" Bastian asked. "I can't say I'm happy about the two of you. If you'd seen what he did on the Isle of Repose...he's a killer, Tressa. I'm glad he's gone from here. I think Connor would have killed him, given the chance. You're the only reason he's still alive."

Tressa fiddled with the ties to her top. "I know. But whatever happened on the island, it wasn't Jarrett's fault. Something had control over him. Connor should understand that. Sometimes our circumstances are bigger than ourselves. It's how we adapt to the aftermath that defines us."

Bastian laughed. "Look how we just adapted." He glanced over at the bed.

"A moment of weakness?" Tressa asked.

"A long goodbye," Bastian said.

She couldn't agree more. Her eyes swept the cottage. Part of her felt as if she'd never left. Another part knew everything she could see and touch was part of her past, including Bastian.

"We'll always be friends," Tressa said. "You, me, and Connor. We've changed, but we'll always have that connection. We got through the fog together, didn't we?"

"Yeah," Bastian said. "And we'll get through this together. After you've done whatever secret mission you're on, why don't you come back here? The three of us can keep digging for the truth about our village."

Tressa almost blurted out a "yes," but she caught herself. She couldn't make any promises, especially not to Bastian. Not again. If something else came up, she'd follow it without a second thought to what lay waiting for her in Hutton's Bridge. "Maybe."

Bastian cleared his throat and straightened his shirt. He had nothing more to say, and what could he say after her answer? "Anyway, thanks for letting Connor and I tear through the cottage last night. I think whatever was written on those missing pages could help us a lot. It could tip the balance in the war."

Tressa silently disagreed. What could words do when people were dying, fighting an enemy who seemed to have an unending supply of fresh warriors? At least with the Green behind them, they could easily triple their numbers. They'd have armor, too.

"I'm glad I could help." Tressa tossed a random dress she'd taken from the wardrobe into her pack. She stalled, hoping Bastian would leave. Suddenly it felt awkward, standing there with him. "I should get going. I have a lot of flying to do before the day is over. I want to get down to the ruins as soon as possible."

"Flying?" Bastian asked, his head cocked to the side. "Is one of the dragons meeting you here?"

A knock at the door broke into their conversation. Tressa breathed

a sigh of relief. She hadn't meant to blurt that out. It was the worse possible time to tell Bastian she was part dragon. She strode across the room and opened it. "Elinor," she said and stepped back into the cottage, giving Elinor room to enter.

The diminutive woman with the long blond hair swept into the cottage. Her eyes rested on Bastian, then flickered to the bed. "Connor said I might find you here."

"Bastian was just going through the bookshelves, looking for some old book my great-grandmother might have kept here," Tressa said. Bastian stood silent.

"That's what Connor said." Elinor relaxed, slipping her hand into Bastian's. Her smile lit up the room. "Let's go. Farah's asking for you."

"Thanks again, Tressa," Bastian said. He stopped, tugging on Elinor's hand. "Don't forget, we're putting the fog back up this morning. I'll tell the guardians about you, but I can't guarantee they won't try to shoot you down if you attempt to come back."

"Thanks, but I doubt I'll be back anytime soon." Tressa avoided looking at Bastian. "I have a few things to take care of. And Jarrett will need me during his recovery."

"I'm the last one to judge," Elinor said, resting a hand on Tressa's arm. "My father was a disturbed man, and I lived with him for years. But I want you to be careful around Jarrett. Something changed him on that island, Tressa."

"The healers will help him." Tressa tried to sound more confident than she felt.

"Don't let down your guard, okay? Come back safely to us." Elinor stressed the final word of her sentence.

Tressa didn't need reminding. Even if Jarrett was lost to her, if the healers couldn't sever his connection to whatever was trying to control him, she wouldn't be back for Bastian. Not for all the good memories. Not after what happened the night before. It had been goodbye.

"I will," Tressa said with a smile. It wasn't genuine, and from the look on Elinor's face, she didn't know the difference. Just as well.

Bastian and Elinor left without a backward glance. Tressa closed the door behind them. She took a deep breath, then strode over to the bedside table. She lay on her stomach, reaching her arm down between the wall and the bed, her fingers searching the small space. After a few moments, she gave up. There wasn't anything shoved down there as she'd suspected.

The morning she'd left for the fog, Tressa had found a handwritten note from Granna. The parchment had been torn from another book. Tressa had hidden the note in her pack when she'd left Hutton's Bridge. It was the same pack she'd hidden in a tree hollow before winning her place in the Black Guard. It had been months since she'd

thought of the pack, which held the note, clothes, a doll, and...

Tressa gasped.

She couldn't believe she'd forgotten.

She had honey in her pack.

Tressa closed her eyes, thinking of the night she'd abandoned Bastian in the hidden camp with their parents. Her father had asked for honey, and she'd promised to leave him some. She had, but not all of it. She'd kept a small stash in the bottom of her bag.

Her heart raced behind her ribs. At the first chance, she would have to find the tree, her pack, and the honey.

Chapter 39

Bastian watched the children run around the village square, kicking a ball made of leather, stitched together with wide wool thread. They whooped and hollered, throwing arms in the air, thrilled to be back home again.

Hutton's Bridge was all any of them had ever known. There was comfort in that. Once it was a town of orphans, the adults mysteriously gone and replaced by the fog. Now it was filled with orphans again, the descendants facing a similar fate.

Connor wandered among the children, Vatra and Fotia nipping at his heels. Just children themselves, they fit in among the younglings of Hutton's Bridge. One day they would change into humans themselves. From the way the children played with the young dragons, Bastian felt they would all easily understand each other. A bond forged by the steel sword of tragedy.

"The fog will return today," Elinor said. She laid a hand on Bastian's arm, her small pale fingers squeezing lightly. "Are you ready?"

Bastian nodded. "I am. I think they are too. The fog is all they've ever known. It should bring them some peace and comfort."

"And you?" Elinor asked. "Did seeing Tressa bring you peace and comfort?"

Bastian rubbed the back of his neck. He gazed at the woman standing in front of him. She'd been open with him since the day they met. She'd given over her inborn healing talents and gifted him with invulnerability. More than that, he loved her in a way he hadn't loved other women, which was why he couldn't stay silent. Bastian grabbed Elinor's hand, pulling her behind a building where no one could see or hear them.

"I slept with Tressa last night," he confessed. His shame wanted him to keep it a secret, but after looking into her eyes, he knew he didn't want any secrets between them.

Elinor took a deep breath, her lips struggled to remain firm. Her damp eyes steeled.

"It just happened. It wasn't like I sought her out for sex. Connor

and I went to her cottage to look for the missing pages of the book. After Connor left, Tressa told me she'd once been pregnant with our child. It was something we'd wanted for so long. But before she'd had a chance to tell me, she lost the baby." Bastian shrugged, knowing all the explanations in the world wouldn't make what he'd done acceptable. "Neither of us plans to be together again. Neither of us wants to."

Elinor stifled a pained laugh behind one shaking hand.

Bastian fell to his knees. He reached for Elinor's hands, but she wouldn't allow him to touch her.

"I suspected as much. Thank you for telling me instead of hiding like a coward." Elinor crossed her arms over her chest, her black dress rumpled.

"I don't love her," Bastian insisted.

"I need some time," Elinor said, her lower lip trembling.

"Of course. Anything. Whatever you need." Bastian stood, his legs suddenly feeling weak and unstable. He looked at the soil under his boots. The ground of his homeland shook underneath him, refusing to hold him up. Bastian glanced at Elinor, her anger emanating through her glare. He fell to his knees, sick to his stomach.

"We are connected, Bastian." She reached out her hand, her fingers curled, squeezing the air.

He gasped, unable to breathe, his heart screeching in pain.

Elinor clutched the air again. Bastian's heart skipped a beat.

Tears spilled from her eyes as she lowered her hand. Bastian fell to the ground, his face resting on the scratchy earth, his breath pushing dirt particles across the ground.

Elinor sank down next to him, resting her cheek on his back. "I'm so sorry, Bastian. I didn't mean to hurt you. I wanted you to love me for me. Not because I hold your life in my hands. But now that you've proven you'll never sever your connection to Tressa, I had to show you that you belong with me alone."

He wanted to ask what she'd done. He loved her, yes, but not like this. Where was that pure excitement they'd found in each other? The respite from the chaos of the world he'd found in her arms had been genuine.

But now...

"Bastian, I love you. Say you love me too," Elinor pleaded into his back.

He did love Elinor. He knew that. Despite what he'd done with Tressa the night before. Yet knowing what Elinor held over him now, his very life in her hands, he couldn't bring himself to say the words.

"Say it," she said, her tone gritty and demanding.

A small fist slammed into his back.

"Say it!"

Bastian shrugged her off and sat up. Elinor knelt, her hands on her legs. Her eyes burned with a fire he'd never seen.

"I love you," he said. It felt hollow. Wrong. But what else was left? He either had to tell her what she wanted to hear or risk losing his life. He thought of his daughter, running and laughing. She'd lost her mother. He couldn't let her lose her father. "I love you." He said it again, thinking solely of his daughter, the words finally infused with meaning and life.

Elinor's lips trembled as a smile bloomed on her face, pushing her angry, red cheeks into tiny apples. "I knew it. I knew you loved me."

Bastian's stomach flipped as he rose. He held out a hand to Elinor. She slipped her delicate fingers in his and stood. "I want to stay here when the fog appears. With you. I want to live in your cottage. Be your wife. Be a mother to your daughter." Elinor swept her arm to the side, taking in the whole of Hutton's Bridge. "We'll build a beautiful life here, sheltered from the rest of the world. You've told me over and over again that you wished the war was done. Here, we can hide from it."

"I thought you wanted to fight," Bastian said.

"I did. Until I realized I could still lose you to Tressa." Elinor stood on her tiptoes, placing her hand on his cheek. "I know I can't lose you to war because of the gift I gave you. I thought I had all of you, Bastian. Last night you proved to me that I don't. So now I need to protect you from her. Keep you away. We will stay here in Hutton's Bridge." Her hand slipped down his face, over his throat, until it came to rest just over his heart. A reminder. A threat.

"You'll forget Tressa soon enough," Elinor said. "I'll make sure of that. Now, are there any other secrets you want to share with me?"

Bastian thought of the whore. He suspected Elinor already knew about his night with the woman. There was still the question of the pregnancy. He refused to presume anything from a lascivious lick of the lips and a rubbing of the belly. For all he knew it was a trick to tempt him back to her bed, or a blatant attempt at extortion. No, he had nothing else to tell Elinor.

"I won't pressure you into my bed," Elinor said. "I want you to come to me freely like before." She stood close, letting her breasts rub against his arm. It quickly aroused him, but for once his mind held sway. Bastian doubted he'd ever want to touch her again.

"I need to talk to Connor," he mumbled. "We need to get the fog restored as soon as possible."

"Come back to me, Bastian," Elinor said. "I'll be here. Waiting. With your daughter as a guarantee of your return."

Fire burned in Bastian's eyes. "Don't hurt her. Or I swear I'll—"

“You’ll what?” Elinor asked. She waved a hand in the air. “No matter. If we all do exactly as we promise, no one will get hurt. I’m so sorry it had to come to this, Bastian.”

He nodded, left with nothing more to say. Bastian trudged toward Connor, wondering how he'd get himself, and his daughter, out of this situation alive.

As night settled on the Charred Barrens, moonlight bathed the broken branches of the skeleton forest in an eerie glow. Tressa glided on the scant breeze, descending into one of the many hidden holes in the ground, entering the underground city.

Though the Black didn't receive sunlight underground, they observed the same day to night sleep cycle as those aboveground. Without cues from nature, the people underground had come up with their own method to keep time. The Black marked time in candles, burning four candles of exact height and girth each day. Timewatchers marked the changing of the candle with a loud gong.

The courtyard was silent as she landed during the fourth candle—the time when everyone slept. Tressa paused for a moment in her dragon form, taking in the city. The buildings didn't feel as tall as they had when she'd first arrived. Experiencing the city as a dragon for the first time, Tressa's snout stood even to the halfway mark of the palace's height.

Within the space of a quick breath, Tressa stood, her hands on her hips. Yes, the buildings had grown again, reaching up to the top of the soaring cave's ceiling. It was amazing how perspective could change so quickly.

She strode into the building where Granna resided, making her way to the chambers where her great-grandmother slept. Tressa burst in the doors, without so much as a knock.

"Tressa?" Granna sat up in her bed, her gray hair ruffled around her face. She rubbed her eyes. "You're safe! Oh my dear sweet child, you're safe!"

"Yes, Granna, it's me."

"Come." Granna scooted over and patted the bed.

Tressa sat, reluctantly, and let Granna clasp her hands.

"Fi told us everything. How you were pulled away from the battle to the Isle of Repose. We are all grateful she followed you or we would have lost you."

Tressa nodded, relieved no one was angry at her.

"You've come to ask me something," Granna said.

Tressa swallowed the lump in her throat. "Bastian's daughter, Farah, swears she saw you when she was being held captive by the Red."

Granna gasped, her veiny hand covering her mouth. She took a few deep breaths, then let her hand drop. "It wasn't me. Tressa, you must know that. I have nothing to do with the Red."

"Farah is young," Tressa said, "but she's a smart little girl. Perhaps I would have assumed it was nothing more than a child's fancy, but there's more. Other sightings of a woman like you."

"I don't know how to explain it," Granna said. "I wish I did."

Tressa only knew Granna's heart, and she had to believe in the woman who'd given her everything. Tressa placed a hand on her lower stomach. Well, almost everything. "She's been sighted elsewhere over the years," Tressa continued. "A woman in the Meadowlands told the story of a young girl wandering in the fog. Her description matched you so closely and they gave your name. I don't know what to make of it."

"It's not me, Tressa." Granna sat up straight in her bed, arranging her nightgown to sit perfectly on her shoulders. "Did I venture into the fog? Yes. Did I meet someone? Yes. But it was Mestifito. Not anyone else. And I am not secretly fighting with the Red. What I do know is that something beyond our understanding is happening. War is upon us and we must fight back. Perhaps we will run into this woman again. If so, I would like to be the one to confront her."

"I would like to be there with you," Tressa said. She sprang up from the bed, pacing her great-grandmother's bedchamber.

"What else is there?" Granna asked. "I can see there is more than this troubling you."

"I did something last night..." Tressa had no worries about confiding about something so personal. Granna had been her closest confidant growing up. They'd shared everything when it came to Tressa's relationships. "I betrayed Jarrett."

Granna clicked her tongue. "I don't have to ask with whom. Bastian."

Tressa looked at the wooden floor. "It just happened. I didn't plan for it. I'm sure Bastian didn't either."

"And how do you feel now? Do you wish you were still with Bastian?" Granna asked.

"No." Tressa's arms dangled to her sides. "That's the worst part. I don't feel much of anything for Bastian anymore. Maybe I'd feel better about myself if I still loved him." Tressa flopped down in a chair. "I never thought I was that kind of person. The kind who sleeps around without considering the feelings of others." She thought of all the rumors of Bastian with women in Hutton's Bridge. She remembered

how they'd punctured holes in her heart.

"We all do things we regret." Granna's feet dangled off the edge of the bed, her tiny feet swinging above the floor like a child. She stood, smoothing out her chemise. It hung loosely on her body, her skinny arms and legs sticking out of the gown. "I think the real question is one you haven't asked yet." Granna poured a cup of water for herself and one for Tressa from her bedside table. "Are you going to tell Jarrett?"

Granna handed the wooden cup to Tressa. Lips shaking, she took a small drink, not realizing until that moment how dry her throat was. "How is he?"

A small smile played on Granna's face. "He is better. Whatever has a hold on him cannot reach him here. Unfortunately, the mages have not been able to sever the ties. Jarrett screams in his sleep, his memories haunting him."

Tressa set the cup down with a trembling hand. "And there I was, off with Bastian, living in the past. Jarrett needs me and what did I do?" The contempt she felt for her choices wrapped around her like an arm around the throat.

"Go to him. Let your heart guide you on the other matter."

"I'm going to tell him," Tressa mumbled.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Granna said. She walked to Tressa, laying her hand on her great-granddaughter's shoulder. "You are a woman of honor. You will do what's right."

"I didn't last night," Tressa said, unwilling to give up her self-hatred. She wasn't the honorable and noble woman she'd tried to be all her life. She was just like everyone else. Flawed and broken, desperately trying to make sense of a chaotic life.

"Tressa, go to Jarrett. It's late, but I know he'll welcome you. He's asked about you more than once, wanting to know if we'd had word."

Tressa felt even worse. The stabbing inside her chest reminded her how violent the heart could be. "I'll go now." She stood, hugging her great-grandmother. "Thank you."

"Of course. And thank you for not believing that woman was me. We will unravel this tangled web of lies. For now, you need to see Jarrett. Then get some sleep. We are regrouping and heading back out in a few days."

"Does Jarrett know you're holding his brother, Avital, in the dungeon?" Tressa asked.

Granna shook her head. "We thought it best he not know. No one trusts Avital. Do you?"

"No," Tressa said. "I don't. I hate keeping more secrets from Jarrett, but considering his current state..."

"It is better we keep them separate for now. Don't worry, we are

caring for Avital. He wants for nothing."

"Thank you," Tressa said. "That reminds me. Are you familiar with the boundary around the Meadowlands?"

Granna nodded. "I only recently heard about it. As you know, we've kept to ourselves here under the Charred Barrens. Our scouts had reported less activity in the north in the past couple years, but they weren't aware of the boundary until recently. Why?"

"I spoke with the council in the Meadowlands. They believe magic can take the barrier down. And if we rescue them, they are willing to share something valuable with us."

"What's that?" Granna asked.

"They've been making dragon armor, and they are willing to fight with us against the Red."

Granna laughed, her hands on her tiny belly. "Well, well, it sounds like we have allies. There may be hope yet. Thank you, Tressa! You've not only given me hope, but this will boost the morale of everyone who fights against the tyranny in the northeast." She patted Tressa's shoulder. "Now go to Jarrett. Take care of your heart. You won't be able to relax until you do."

Chapter 41

"Come in." The voice came from inside, weak, but sure.

Tressa's fist still hovered at the wooden door. After rapping twice, she'd waited for a moment before she nearly bolted back to her own chambers. But he'd heard. He'd answered. She hadn't been sure he'd be able to hear the knock after losing his ears.

She pushed the door open and entered with a tentative smile on her face. "I see you're doing better." She laid a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"I am now that you're here," Jarrett said. "The mages said they can't heal my ears, but they were able to lay some magic on me that allows me to hear a bit better." He sat up in his chair and set the book he'd been reading in his lap.

Tressa leaned over, reading the cover. "Secrets of the Mage. Sounds interesting."

"It is," Jarrett said. "Trying to learn a little bit more about magic. I'd like to learn to harness it. Maybe I can figure out how to break this bond myself, since no one else is able to." He stood up. "At least here I can't hear the invader's voice in my head." He held his arms open.

Tressa collapsed into them.

"I missed you," he said, whispering into her hair.

"I missed you too. So much," she said, echoing him. Her arms wrapped around Jarrett and she buried her face in his chest. She took a deep breath. No matter how long he'd been away from the Sands, he still had an air of exotic spice wafting around him.

He caressed her hair with one hand while the other rested on her hip. Tressa looked up, offering his lips to him. They kissed, familiar and filled with longing.

Jarrett pushed on her shoulders, gently, but enough to break their embrace. "We shouldn't. One of the mages expressed concern. It's possible the person who has enchanted me can hear and sense what goes on around me. I don't want anyone to share in this but us."

Tressa nodded, wringing her hands. Guilt washed over her. If Jarrett was right, then it was the wrong time to tell him about her indiscretion with Bastian. No one knew but the two of them, and she certainly didn't want some evil mage to have leverage over Jarrett. No. She'd tell him later.

With relief coursing through her chest, Tressa managed a small

smile. "It's okay. We have our whole lives ahead of us."

Jarrett smiled back. "We do."

They stared at each other in an uneasy silence. Tressa had so much she wanted to tell him, but knowing someone else could be listening in left her mute. Jarrett reached out, taking her hand in his. He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

Bastian's face flashed in her mind. Tressa jerked her hand away. "Sorry," she said, backing up. "It's just that—"

She paused, and Jarrett looked at her expectantly. That same trusting look in his eyes. She opened her mouth, taking a deep breath, ready to tell him, despite whoever might be listening in. "While I was in Hutton's Bridge last night—"

"Are Bastian, Elinor, and Connor okay?" Jarrett interrupted. His eyes narrowed and his shoulders slumped. "I still don't remember what I did on the Isle of Repose." He spun around, stalking back to his chair. "I wish I hadn't taken them to that damned island." He rested a hand on the back of the chair, gripping it until his knuckles turned white.

She rested her hand atop his. "Jarrett, they know that." Well, Bastian and Elinor knew it. Connor would have more trouble understanding, but no one would ever hold it against him if he couldn't forgive Jarrett. Tressa doubted Jarrett would ever forgive himself.

Jarrett didn't, or wouldn't, turn and look at her. "I wish I could help. Somehow make it up to them."

Tressa leaned her head on his arm. She thought of everything that had happened since he'd called her to that island. "Wait. I think I know a way you can help."

Jarrett turned, his eyes sad, but hopeful.

"When you compelled me to the Isle of Repose, you used magic unlike anything I've ever seen from you," Tressa said.

Jarrett nodded. "I don't think it was fully me. Whoever was controlling me used my body as a vessel for his power."

"That's what I thought," Tressa said. Despite everything, a smile slipped out.

"I think I have an idea," Jarrett said. "What if we lure the Red army to the Isle of Repose. Do you think I could help us destroy them?"

Tressa's head was swimming with possibilities. The Black could station themselves in the Meadowlands. With only a signal, they could fly to the Isle, using Jarrett's magic to attack the Red. Obviously it was stronger when he was on the island. Though, it would be risky. Lives could be lost, but in war, lives were to be lost anyway.

They could all be free.

"It might work," Tressa said, her voice guarded and hesitant. "But what if you can't control yourself? What if you hurt another innocent?"

Jarrett flashed a smile. "I won't. Not again. I know I won't."

"Okay," Tressa said. "I'm going to talk to Granna about this." She'd started to tell him about Bastian and she was too heartsick to try again after he'd changed the topic. The last thing he needed now was to add her indiscretion to his sadness. No, not now. It wasn't time. "I need to prepare to leave for the Meadowlands. Get some rest. Someone will come for you when it's time to fly."

Jarrett leaned over, kissing Tressa. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. Tressa left the room, slightly sick to her stomach. She didn't deserve a man like Jarrett. He was upstanding and honest. She was nothing. Worse than nothing for betraying him.

* * *

JARRETT SAT BACK DOWN on the chair, picking up the book he'd been reading. He closed his eyes. He didn't need to read it. Not now. He'd learned everything about becoming a mage in a short time. The spells. How to prepare his body and mind. Using stealth and trickery to get what he wanted. It was all engrained in him.

All thanks to his master on the Isle of Repose.

Jarrett, my pet, have you done it? Have you convinced the dragons to come to my island so we can finally dispose of all of them?

"Yes, master," he answered.

A voice cackled deep inside Jarrett's mind. Soon it would be over. There would be no more war. All the dragons would be dead and Tressa's death would be the most delicious.

Mages from the Black held hands and chanted until the

invisible wall became visible. Tressa gasped as the Green dragons disappeared momentarily. Then the solid white wall, glittering with veins of magic, exploded, dissipating into the air. The smoke cleared and one Green dragon took a tentative step forward. One claw crossed the line where the barrier had stood. Then another, until all three of his claws moved beyond.

Next, a foot. Then another, until he was tripped up by a smaller dragon bounding over him, tumbling across the grass and landing at Tressa's feet. The little dragon popped up, swirled in the air, and landed on human feet, her dress swishing at her ankles.

"You did it!" Margret yelled and clapped, dancing.

Tressa reached out for the young girl. "It's all thanks to you. You're the one who found me on the beach. If you hadn't told me everything, then I wouldn't have been able to come back and free you. You deserve all the praise."

Margret's cheeks turned pink. She hugged Tressa.

"Margret! You were told to wait until we were sure it was safe. You could have been killed," a woman called out.

Tressa looked up, letting the girl go.

"Sorry, Momma," Margret said. "I saw Renny's claws were okay, so I took the chance."

"What if he had been wrong? What if he'd been off by only a few steps? You'd be laying on the ground, hurt, or worse." The woman strode forward, her curly red hair streaming down past her hips. She shook a finger at Margret.

"You must be Margret's mother," Tressa said, stepping between the two and offering her hand. "I'm happy to finally meet you."

The woman sighed, her shoulders drooping, and the anger washing away. "Yes, I'm Mary." She took Tressa's hand in hers, pumping it vigorously. "It's nice to meet you as well. Thank you for everything you've done for our people."

"I'm happy to," Tressa said.

"And we have a debt to pay," Blythe said, making her way over to

Tressa and Mary. "You did as you said. Now we will do as we promised. Our wings and fire are yours. Our teeth and talons fight for you."

"Not for me. For freedom. For an end to tyranny." Tressa wrapped her arm around Margret's shoulder. "For the children and their future."

"Do you have children of your own?" Mary asked.

It was only a question born out of curiosity. Still, Tressa's lack of children haunted her in a way no one else could understand. She thought of the baby she'd lost without even knowing. She'd been healed in the sea and begun again in these grasslands.

"No," Tressa said, "but maybe someday. I would like to have children very much." She ruffled Margret's hair. "As much as I'd like to get to know you better, Mary, we must begin our preparations for battle. We have a secret weapon." She glanced back at Jarrett, who sat alone at the edge of the milling crowds. "We need to prepare. I'll fill you in as the others get ready to sleep for the night."

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Tressa emerged from her sleeping roll in the meadow. Renny had offered her a place in the hall, but she chose to stay outside with the others from the Black. Granna had also turned them down, preferring to sleep curled up in Mestifito's wing. Their close relationship, one that had spanned decades and heartache touched Tressa. She looked over at Jarrett, still asleep and within arm's reach.

Tressa fought the urge to reach out and touch Jarrett's short hair. He'd shorn it to the scalp after arriving at the Ruins of Ebon, keeping it away from the still-healing wounds where his ears used to be. Instead, she held back, letting him sleep. He would need his strength for what lay ahead.

Tressa admired his conviction. He was willing to help the Black, even though it meant going back to the island and getting ever closer to the one who controlled him. He was a warrior, battle would be easy for him. Giving himself over to the beast that had mutilated him would prove the greater challenge. Freeing him from whatever held him captive would be their final task. Together they could do it. Tressa was sure of that. They could face anything together.

The camp sprang to life around her, as if they sensed her awakening. People ate over small campfires, sharing rounds of mead and water, breaking bread, and pulling grapes from their stems. Still, Jarrett slept, a neutral expression on his face. His chest rose and fell in measured breaths.

Tressa shook off the night's sleep and walked to Fi's fire. "May I sit

with you?" she asked her dear friend.

"Of course," Fi said, scooting over on her log. "Are you ready for today?" She nodded at the dragons getting fitted with armor at the outskirts of the camp.

"I don't know if I can ever be ready for battle," Tressa admitted. "Honestly, I'm getting a little tired of it. Do you think this will really end the war?"

"If we can chop off the head, the snake will die," Fi said. "We'll lure the Red Queen out and we'll kill her."

"You make it sound so simple," Tressa said.

"It is. It's a simple plan, which is always the best. Unfortunately, we have a lot of people out there, and any one of them can make a mistake that tips the balance from our favor. We just have to hope we can pull it off, no matter what happens." Fi took a bite of jerky, chewing noisily with her mouth partially open. She swallowed and smiled at Tressa. "Sorry, but I like to eat a lot before a battle. No one wants to be up there with an empty stomach."

Off to the side, dragons began their mock battles. Knocking into each other, striking with a taloned foot, all in an effort to test their new armor. Not only did it hold, but there wasn't a dent to be seen.

"It's amazing," Tressa said. "The armor appears light enough to fly in without much trouble."

"I think we should count ourselves lucky you are on our side, Tressa. Because the Green was preparing for a battle. It could have easily been against us. They are a strong ally and it's thanks to you they're fighting with us."

Tressa swirled the water in her cup. She watched it spin in a circle with a tiny funnel in the middle. There were wonders everywhere, even in the smallest things, particularly in places she often didn't think to look. "I didn't do anything amazing, Fi. It was pure luck I ended up on the shores of the Meadowlands."

Fi snorted. "Then I guess we have Jacinda to thank. The Yellow Queen set you on the path that led not only to freeing the Meadowlands, but also to them giving us all of this armor."

"She also gave me Jarrett," Tressa said. "And look how he has suffered. If you give me credit for our chance at victory, then I also take the blame for Jarrett's troubles."

Fi wrapped an arm around Tressa's shoulders. "We'll find a way to heal him completely. I promise. And I'm so sorry I couldn't help more. I really thought our healers and mages would find a way to sever whatever hold is over him."

"I'm glad you took him to the Ruins," Tressa said. "I would have foolishly clung to him when what he needed was to rest and heal. Besides, I had a job to do. I'll do what it takes to end this war."

Bells clanged in the village. Tressa's jumped up. "That's the call to arms. The first group will be headed out, acting as bait."

"Then it's time for us to set up our little surprise," Fi said, standing and stretching her legs.

"And I need to prepare Jarrett for submitting to the magic's control again," Tressa said. She regretted using him in this way, even though he had agreed to help in any way he could. Unfortunately, she had to put him directly in the path of death for them to have any chance at a normal life.

Chapter 43

Tressa spent the morning with Jarrett. He spent a lot of time reassuring her he would be fine. That he would submit to the Keeper's power, and that the Black mages would be able to bring him back to her. They hadn't been able to sever the bond, but they felt they'd learned enough to shield it.

Fi ran over to them, tugging Tressa away by the elbow.

"How goes it?" Tressa asked. Fi had been consulting with a scout. The man mounted his dragon, taking off once more into the clear late afternoon sky.

"Good." Fi ran a hand through her black hair. "Our first flight of dragons has kept the Red army occupied all day. Soon they'll break in retreat."

"What if the Red doesn't follow?" Tressa asked. Their entire plan hinged on getting the Red army, and its queen, to follow them to the Isle of Repose. Once they were on their way, the Black mages would unshield Jarrett. Then it was all up to his strange power to take down the enemy.

"They will. Our men have already found a good lure." Fi smiled, her teeth glinting in the light of the newly setting sun.

"What's that?"

"They noticed one dragon fighting from the back. Lots of bravado. Little actual skill, yet the other dragons protected him. That tells us that this dragon is being allowed to fight, but not on the front lines like the others. He's important. A child of the queen, perhaps," Fi said. "I wish we had more intelligence on the Red. They've been too good at hiding what's been going on there for the last eighty years. Since the fog fell on your town and the war was suspended, everything's been strangely quiet in the northeast."

Tressa wished she'd had more time to explore and learn about Malum. In their haste to find the children, they'd caused a lot of trouble but learned very little. "I do still think it's all related to the honey."

"Ah yes," Fi said, "the mysterious honey of Hutton's Bridge. Everyone fights for it, but no one knows why."

Tressa glanced over at Granna and Mestifito. They wanted answers and had spent years trying to discern the reason for the Red's obsession with the honey from her little town. But if their plan worked, they would never find out. The Red Queen would be dead. Granna had reluctantly agreed that in the name of peace, she should not be spared—even if it meant the mystery would never be solved.

The dragon that had left not long ago was flying back, frantic, followed by their other dragons in their battle armor. Four riders held onto ropes, their muscles straining. Tressa could see their pained grimaces from the ground. Trailing behind them, fighting against the restraints, was a small Red dragon.

"They're early!" Fi screamed. She jumped from the stump she'd been sitting on and ran for the bell.

"Prepare Jarrett," Tressa yelled to the mages who were sitting on the grass playing a game of dice.

They left the bone dice on the patchy ground, forming a circle around Jarrett. They chanted in unison, in a language Tressa couldn't understand until Jarrett stirred and groaned.

Tressa bolted under their arms, landing on the ground next to Jarrett. "It's time," she said. "We need you."

Jarrett sat up. His eyes were alert. Jarrett pulled Tressa in, his lips landing on hers, kissing her with a hunger she'd missed.

"Jarrett," she said, pulling away, "I have something to tell you." He had to know before he went any further that the woman he was fighting for had betrayed him.

"There isn't time," he said, standing and brushing the dirt off his pants. Jarrett looked up into the sky at the ebony and emerald dragons attempting to yank the fighting ruby dragon to the ground. "They are coming. The dragons are coming to me. I have to be ready for them."

"But..." she sputtered, annoyed at herself and the urgency she felt. They needed Jarrett, yet it wasn't right to ask him to fight. When he heard the truth, he might want to leave Tressa standing there to get roasted by the incoming army. "That night in Hutton's Bridge," she said, breathless, "I didn't spend the night alone."

"Bastian?" he asked, his voice stony and his eyes vacant.

She nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You don't have to stay and fight. I'm so sorry. Don't put yourself in harm's way. Not for me." And then she knew the truth. She hadn't waited to tell him because of fear of rejection. No, it was fear of Jarrett losing his life on the battlefield. She wanted him to reject her. She wanted him to leave now. To save himself. To live, instead of facing an army that would try to rip him to shreds. "Go," she pleaded with him. Her head swam. Confusion wrapped around her thoughts. She'd promised herself she

would keep the secret, and now she couldn't seem to stop herself.

One of the mages coughed.

Tressa started, forgetting they'd been standing there the whole time. They'd heard her confession.

"They are coming," a mage said, pointing to the sky.

In the distance, the Red horde vibrated in the air.

"Step away," Jarrett commanded. "All of you. Step back." He raised his hands to the sky.

"You don't have to do this," Tressa said, tugging on his arm. She'd lost everything. She lost her life in Hutton's Bridge. She'd lost Bastian. She'd lost her humanity. She'd lost her self-respect. Now she would lose Jarrett, if only he would listen to her.

Jarrett shook her arm off of his with surprising strength. Tressa stumbled backward. He turned, looking at her, his eyes red and glowing.

Tressa's hand flew to her mouth. He had changed without changing. The differences were subtle, but striking. His eyes, his stance, the hunch of his shoulder.

"Tonight I feast on the flesh of the dragons! Come to me!" It wasn't Jarrett's voice, but another's. One Tressa knew and feared. The thing that had controlled him did so once again.

Jarrett's hands were pointed toward the red cloud. Balls of fire exploded from his hands, mixing with a chortle dripping from his slack lips.

Tressa could see the Red's individual wings now. Some alighted with fire. They lost altitude and crashed into other dragons in flight, knocking them to the sea below. The concentrated mass of dragons in pursuit didn't hesitate. They flew harder, faster, swerving to avoid Jarrett's fireballs.

"To the sky," called out one of the leaders behind Tressa. Uncountable numbers of Black and Green dragons with riders on their backs burst into the air, flying toward the Red army.

Tressa stood still, her hands shaking. She should take to the sky too. Join the Black dragons in locating the queen. She clenched her fists, her arms trembling at her sides. But the change wouldn't come. The dragon inside slept. Or hid. She wasn't sure which.

She glanced at Jarrett. Everything inside her screamed. Stay with him. Jarrett was her only concern. Her thoughts were confused, erratic. Tressa clamped her hands over her head. She only knew that for the first time since stepping into the fog, she doubted every decision she'd made until that very moment.

Chapter 44

Bastian ignored the gnawing pit in his stomach. He and

Connor had left Hutton's Bridge shrouded in fog the day before and headed north to meet Tressa's army. He couldn't shake his anxiety at leaving Farah with Elinor. The woman wasn't the sweet, young healer he thought he knew. She was obsessive, controlling, much like her father. She'd claimed to be very different from the man who'd stolen the dragon eggs, but at their core, they were much the same.

And now his daughter was trapped in Elinor's clutches.

Bastian and Connor had waited in the meadow, camping and watching for any sign of the army. Once the Black and Green dragons had appeared above them, Bastian had leapt on Connor and they took to the sky.

The wind raked through his hair and lashed at his face, stinging his eyes. Connor's wings beat against the currents, refusing to give nature an advantage over them. Nothing would stop the two of them from reaching the war. Both had children to protect. Both had a driving need to make the world safer for the next generation.

Bastian scanned the dragonriders of the Black, looking for Tressa, but he didn't see her. No matter. He'd find her after the battle. He'd tell her what Elinor had done. Together, Tressa, Connor, and Bastian would find a resolution. That was the source of all of their problems. Once they'd been separated, everything spun out of control. Together, the three of them were unstoppable.

Even if Bastian and Tressa never found their way back to each other, even if she insisted on staying with that traitorous Jarrett, they still needed to work together. Connor was the brains. Bastian was the brawn. Tressa was the heart. Just as they'd always been.

Connor swooped between two ebony dragons, settling into the pattern. The other dragons nodded their heads, and the riders raised a fist in the air. Until Fotia and Vatra grew to full size, Connor was the only Blue dragon who could join in battle. The other dragons knew the significance of his appearance.

Bastian raised his sword as the dragons broke rank when the Red horde arrived. Connor weaved in and out of the fray, Bastian thrusting

at the Red, both dragon and rider. He clutched Connor's scales with one hand, his nails digging into the hard skin. Bastian wished they'd had time to procure a saddle like the other riders. His thighs strained against Connor, the scales digging in, piercing Bastian's skin. Blood welled up, staining his pants. Still, he held on and fought.

His arm weary, his chest exhausted from the strained breaths, Bastian slumped against Connor. Despite being unable to communicate with words, Connor seemed to understand Bastian needed a break. He fell back behind the main thrust of the flying army. For the first time he could see the balls of fire coming from the ground.

Bastian glanced down, tracing their path to the source.

Jarrett.

The lying bastard. Jarrett wasn't just a humble warrior. He had more magic in him than he'd dared let any of them know. Tressa stood next to Jarrett, her fists clenched, her dark hair blowing in the wind.

Bastian's heart ached. He wanted to go down there, sweep her away from Jarrett, and fly her to safety. But she'd made her choice.

Bastian's eyes were pulled back to the battle. The fire from the dragons' mouths mingled with the balls coming from Jarrett. Bastian begrudgingly admitted that the man was helping them.

A moment later, a Black dragon howled, its neck snapping downward, its eyes trained on Jarrett. Bastian looked again. The crazed man laughed, his shoulders shaking, as fireballs continued to burst from his palms, landing on not just the Red, but also now the Black dragons.

"What in the name of all that's holy?" Bastian dug his heels into Connor's sides, pushing down with his hands, hoping Connor understood.

He did. They rushed down toward the ground. Bastian knew Connor's need to stop Jarrett was strong, if not stronger, than his own. Connor swooped over Jarrett, narrowly avoiding a fireball. It skimmed the edge of Bastian's knee. His pants smoldered.

"I'm gonna kill him," Bastian muttered through clenched teeth.

Connor reared back, a familiar popping noise coming from his throat.

"No!" Bastian tugged on Connor's neck. "Tressa's down there. Don't!" He hoped Connor understood.

Connor roared. Bastian could feel the dragon's frustration as its muscles tightened in torturous restraint.

"Take me down," Bastian screamed, nudging Connor with his heels.

Connor dove toward the ground. Bastian jumped from his back,

rolling across the ground on his shoulder. He popped to his feet, his sword at the ready. Heart pounding, sweat dripping down his forehead, Bastian waved Tressa away from Jarrett.

"No!" She shook her head, refusing the leave the maniac's side.

Couldn't she see how twisted her lover had become?

Bastian leapt toward Jarrett, his sword pointed at the man's chest.

Jarrett's eyes left the sky and trained on Bastian. He held out one hand, and Bastian felt a tightness grip his throat.

No. Not again. He couldn't fight this magic. Not with a sword. Not with his brawn. He was useless. Bastian glanced at Tressa, her eyes widening in horror.

As the squeezing intensified, Bastian gasped for air. His hand lost its grip on his sword and it clattered to the ground, landing useless on the pebbled beach.

Bastian dropped to his knees. Still, he fought, moving ever closer to Jarrett. Muscles bulged in his thighs as he moved toward the man, not giving up. He'd already distracted Jarrett from shooting fireballs at the sky. Now Bastian had only one goal: kill the man.

Everything before him swam in a haze. He vaguely heard someone calling his name. A woman. It was a voice he knew. A voice he loved.

But another face haunted his mind. His daughter. Farah. Her ringlets dropping to her shoulders. The sweet smile that brightened his day. Her caring heart.

Farah was with Elinor. Another enemy. One far more dangerous to his daughter than the one in front of him. But Jarrett was dangerous to Tressa.

Another choice. Once, he'd chosen his daughter over his wife. Today, he chose both Farah and Tressa.

With the last of his strength, Bastian sprang off his knees, lunging toward Jarrett. His hand grabbed his sword, and with one mighty swing, Bastian ran the blade through Jarrett's stomach.

He turned, looking at Tressa. Her hands covered her mouth. His eyelids closed, Farah's face the only thing he could see.

Bastian's neck snapped, his head lolling to the side.

Farah would be safe now. Safe forever.

* * *

ELINOR LAY ON THE GROUND, her legs twitching and her hand around her throat. Her breath choking, trapped.

"Hang on," Hazel pleaded. "Farah, get one of the healers. Hurry!"

Hazel's hand rested on Elinor's forehead. But it would do no good. Elinor knew. Bastian was dying. So would she.

Elinor's eyelashes fluttered in the damp air. Fog swirled around the

edges of the village. It was beautiful in its simplicity. She would miss it. She'd had such high hopes for a life with Bastian.

No longer. He was gone. She could feel it. Elinor let out one last breath, following Bastian into death.

“*B*astian!” Tressa ran to the side of the man she’d loved most

of her life, taking his limp body in her arms. “How could you?” she yelled at Jarrett. Her head suddenly felt clear, as if she’d awoken from a deep, dark nightmare.

The man before her wasn’t the man she’d loved. No, Jarrett was gone, replaced by a monster.

Jarrett stood, unsteady, with his hands on the hilt of the sword. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the sword out of his stomach and tossed it to the side. Blood gushed from the gaping hole. Jarrett placed one hand over the wound, and he lifted the other hand toward the sky, shooting more fireballs at the dragons. The flow of blood ebbed, and Jarrett dropped his hand from his gut. The wound had healed.

Tressa cradled Bastian’s body, struggling against the foul magic coming from Jarrett. Fire rained around her. The smell of burnt flesh, both human and dragon, permeated the air. She heaved to the side, her stomach unable to handle the destruction.

She wiped the back of her hand over her mouth and looked up at the sky. The Red realized they’d been ambushed. They were fighting back with everything they had, and were met by the Black and Green with equal fervor. For the first time in the war, the Red were outnumbered. The Green’s armor also allowed her allies to endure longer. Far fewer of the Black and Green fell from the sky. There was a chance Tressa’s side would actually win.

And all she could do was stand on the ground and watch. Bastian was dead. Jarrett beyond her reach. And her dragon side wouldn’t make an appearance.

Her eyes were pulled back to Jarrett. His body contorted, jerking from side to side, while his arms waved in the air, sending up a barrage of flame toward the dragons. His scarlet eyes glanced at her as his lips curled into a smirk. “I will kill them all. Every dragon will die at my hands. Thank you for bringing them to me.”

None of the dragons in the sky were paying any attention to where Jarrett’s shots were fired. They were too busy fighting for their lives. He used the chaos to his advantage, taking down any dragon with a

vulnerability.

"Stop!" Tressa laid Bastian carefully on the ground, stood, and tugged at Jarrett's arms, but he shook her off as if she were only a pesky fly. Tears stung at the corners of her eyes.

He was too strong, overflowing with a power she didn't understand. Her eyes were drawn to the sky again, as dragons fought with talons and teeth. Fire burned the clouds and death rained blood.

Jarrett didn't spare another glance at Tressa. He'd determined she was no longer a threat. Tressa stood next to Bastian, watching Jarrett maim dragon after dragon, drawing no distinction between friend and foe. He wasn't the man she fell in love with. Not anymore.

Tressa knew she'd spent too much time protecting people who only betrayed her. Fenn, her father, who'd joined the Red and tried to turn her to his side. Bastian, as he drowned his sorrows between any offered pair of breasts. Granna, who'd drugged Tressa for years, keeping her from conceiving and concealing the truth about the very blood flowing within her veins.

No more. She would not let them win. Anger bubbled in her chest. Fire popped and burned in her stomach. Her skin ripped. It was coming. The dragon.

Tressa's jaws opened wide, as she roared, her teeth glinting. With little effort she raised one taloned foot. Stomping as hard as she could, Tressa smashed Jarrett under her foot. Pulling back, she looked at his body with one slitted eye. His chest lay still. His lips parted in a grimace.

A Blue dragon landed next to Tressa. He reached over, nuzzling her neck. Connor had wanted to kill Jarrett. Instead, Bastian had given his life for them. A group of men dressed in black descended on Jarrett's body, their swords drawn, as a one-eyed man in gray stood off to the side. So the Black Guard had come and brought a mystery friend with them. She would let them determine Jarrett's fate.

Tressa burst into the sky, dodging falling body parts, but unable to avoid the showers of blood. Drenched in thick bodily fluids, she flew higher and higher until she could see the battle from above.

Red, Black, Green, and one Yellow blurred in the air. Entangled. Vicious. Her dragon head snapped back, looking again at the fray.

She scanned the battle, looking for only one dragon. The Red Queen. She was the reason they were fighting. She had equipped Tressa's father with the means to kidnap the villagers of Hutton's Bridge. She provoked the Yellow into sealing off the Meadowlands. She sent the Red dragons to attack the Black.

Tressa wanted to chop off the head and see if the body flailed or continued to fight. All she needed was the queen. A bird flew by, cawing, drawing Tressa's eyes to the east. She blinked. Far away in the

distance something coasted. Something with a faint tint of red.

Without another thought, she pushed off, flapping her wings as hard as she could toward the spot in the distance. No matter how hard she pushed, it didn't seem to get any closer. Tressa tucked her back legs up tightly against her chest. Her wings flapped in unison, cupping the breeze under them, using every tiny advantage she could get.

The Red dot drew closer and closer until Tressa could see the dragon wasn't alone. A rider was on its back, gray hair streaming like a flag in a storm. She hunched over her dragon, lying low.

The rider's head turned.

Tressa snorted, plumes of smoke from her nostrils. She blinked again, and the rider's grin punched her in the gut.

She knew that grin. That hair. It was Granna.

But how? Why?

Tressa followed the dragon with all of her strength, refusing to believe what she saw. If she could only get closer. Take a better look...

The Red dragon banked to the right, descending toward the castle in the distance. Tressa had been so focused on the dragon and its rider that she'd neglected to notice they'd flown all the way to the Red castle in the northeast part of the Hills of Flame. It must have taken hours. No matter. She was so close.

Spires rose into the clouds, protruding spikes ripping the vapor to shreds. The sun was setting behind them, and bats circled, celebrating the coming darkness.

The Red dragon flew past a window too small for a dragon. The rider jumped through. Tressa followed, saying a little prayer to whatever gods might be listening that she would not miss the window and fall to her death.

Taking a deep breath, Tressa changed from dragon to human. Her hands reached out as she fell through the air, scrabbling for the windowsill. One hand grasped it, fingers slamming on stone, nails digging into the rubble. A shriek ripped from her throat as she pulled up with one arm, desperately willing the second to join it. Biting her lower lip, Tressa called upon all the muscles she'd honed while training for the Black Guard. With one final burst, she flung her arm up. Her fingertips grazed the edge of the sill, falling short.

Tears sprang unbidden from her eyes. Now wasn't the time for weakness. She closed her eyes and let go, hoping her dragon form wouldn't fail her.

Something grabbed her wrist, pulling her up.

Tressa's eyes snapped open. A kindly face appeared from the window above. A woman who looked exactly like Granna, but with green eyes instead of blue. Even though she appeared as old as Granna, her strength belied her age. The woman gave one tug,

yanking Tressa up high enough that she could grab hold with her other arm. Tressa heaved herself the rest of the way up and over the sill.

Tressa rested only for a moment before sitting up and gazing at the woman before her.

"Who are you?" Tressa asked.

"I am One."

Tressa didn't appreciate the cryptic answer. Still, she held back her anger. The woman had saved her, after all.

"What is your name?" Tressa asked, hoping the more direct question would yield a solid answer.

"I am the Queen of the Red. I am One. I have no name." The woman stood still, her arms hanging limply at her sides. The smile on her face was too familiar, making Tressa's skin crawl. The queen might have looked like her great-grandmother upon first glance, but they were not the same woman.

"How shall I address you?" Tressa asked, promising herself it would be the last time she would ask.

"You may call me Sophia." The old woman smiled.

Tressa jumped to her feet. "I will not. You are not Granna."

The woman clicked her tongue. "Such impudence from one so young."

"I am not young," Tressa said, her anger growing, despite her wish to contain it. She stalked toward the woman, across the wooden floor covered in dirty rushes.

"Compared to me, you are but a babe." The woman reached out, resting one wrinkled hand on Tressa's cheek. "Barely born. Your whole life ahead of you." She lowered her hand. "But your life is so short. You poor people, living only a handful of years before your horrifying deaths. It's a wonder you even leave your quaint homes."

"I don't understand. Aren't you—" Tressa took in the woman once more. Seeing what others had seen. Farah had claimed she'd seen Granna in Malum. The woman in the Meadowlands had told the story of the young boy lost in the fog so many years ago. "Are you related to me?"

The old woman laughed, her shoulders shaking. "We are not related, child. Your true great-grandmother fights in the battle, riding on the back of the beast who holds her in thrall."

"Mestifito?" Tressa asked. "What do you mean, 'holds her in thrall?'"

The old woman chuckled and cocked her head to the side. "You do not understand, yet you were held in such a thrall by your own lover. He, in turn, is held in thrall by the Keeper."

"Is? Jarrett's still alive?" Tressa wasn't sure how she felt about it.

The woman's only answer was a cryptic smile. "It is all magic of my world. And this," she said, holding out her arms, "is only an illusion. I cannot rule the Red unless I grow and die and grow and die and grow and die. Over and over again, always taking on the form of the last child I set eyes upon. It is part of the illusion. I must keep the people here happy, let them think they know who rules them."

Tressa backed away, wishing she'd taken the time to hide a dagger or two in the secret pockets of her battle clothes.

"Because if they knew," the woman continued, "they would lose their minds, knowing what waited outside the mountains. But you," she rasped, pointing at Tressa, "you will know. Because I am dying. Someone must take on the mantle. Someone must protect these insolent, ungrateful, bickering children from what lies beyond."

Tressa couldn't help herself. She had to know. "Beyond what?"

"I knew I chose well. I've been watching you, Tressa Webb of Hutton's Bridge. You will come. You will see. You will feed it the honey."

"It?" Dread rose in her chest.

The woman's laugh echoed in the room. "Yes, it will be pleased to see you. It will be pleased to have the honey once more. The bees we harvested from Hutton's Bridge after the fog dissipated will not produce honey here."

"I—I don't have any honey with me." Tressa held her empty hands out. She tried not to think about the honey laying in the bottom of her pack hidden in the forest.

The woman's smile turned to a frown. "Oh, now isn't that a shame? Follow me."

They traveled down a staircase, descending for nearly an eternity, stopping eventually in a cave bathed in torchlight.

The old woman stood in silhouette at the far end of the cave, her arm reaching through an entrance to another hall, a smile on her face. Her lips pursed as she cooed at whatever lay beyond. "Come. I have someone to introduce you to," the woman said, her tone tender and far too familiar.

Despite her trepidation, Tressa's curiosity propelled her feet forward.

The woman beckoned as Tressa drew closer. A pungent smell, so similar to the vinegar they used to pickle their cucumbers in Hutton's Bridge but laced with the stench of decay, permeated the dank air. Tressa's nose wrinkled, and she fought instinct, leaving her hands hanging at her side instead of covering her face.

"This is Decarian," the old woman said, sweeping an arm out to the side.

Tressa peeked around the corner. She gasped, her hands covering

her mouth in horror. "What is that?" she managed to squeak out.

"This is the guardian, Decarian. He separates Dragonlands from Desolation. He keeps you safe from what lies beyond."

Tressa closed her eyes, hoping the monstrosity before her would disappear. When her eyes opened, nothing had changed. Only steps ahead the floor broke away. Flames jumped and licked at the broken edge. And beyond? A beast standing taller than the caverns under the Ruins of Ebon. It observed Tressa with eyes the size of her entire body. Four horns protruded from its head, two curling up, and two curling down. Long talons stuck out from its hands. Tressa could only see to its waist, the rest of the beast was hidden by flames.

"I don't understand." Tressa stumbled backward. "What is Desolation? Where did this thing come from?"

The old woman cackled. "Desolation is that land that lies beyond the Hills of Flame to the east."

"Nothing lies beyond," Tressa said. "The world ends beyond the castle walls." All the books Granna had ever shown her confirmed this. The Red lay on the edge of the world with nothing beyond the mountains east of its borders.

"Ends?" The old woman tossed the beast a leg lying on the ground. Tressa held back the urge to vomit as she realized the floor was littered with dismembered humans. "The world does not end. This is only the beginning. Desolation is the land beyond, but it is a world your people are not prepared to face. You are like children, squabbling over a toy."

Tressa folded her arms across her chest. "No, that's not true. It was the Red that started this war. They also started the last. We were fine before you interfered."

The old woman spun, facing Tressa with squinted eyes. "We were fine until the beekeeper at Hutton's Bridge cut off our supply of honey. It is the fault of your ancestors." She poked Tressa's shoulder with one bony finger. "If you had only continued to produce the honey, give us what we need, then none of this would have happened."

"What is so damn special about the honey?" Tressa asked. "Why start a war over it?"

The old woman cocked her head. "My dear, the honey is the only thing keeping this beast from crossing the border. The honey dulls its senses. It takes away its power. Decarian's minions cannot walk without its command. But if what you say is true, if the honey is gone and there is no more to be had, then the Dragonlands are in for a war unlike any they've ever fought."

"Because the beast will cross over?" Tressa asked. Her voice cracked, fear stripping her dry. A spiked tail whipped around in the flames. The beast licked its lips with a forked tongue.

"Decarian will destroy everything in its path. And if you think the beast is to be feared, do not even contemplate the army behind it. The enemy has been waiting lifetimes to feast on the flesh of the people in the Dragonlands." The old woman shrugged and smiled. "I have been its guardian for generations. I am tired. It is your turn. The Red is yours Tressa. Your people will win today. I have seen it. Now claim it, responsibilities and all."

Tressa bit her lip. "Will you stay with me? Help me understand how to protect the Dragonlands?"

"Me?" The old woman asked. "My time is done." She took two steps backward and fell into the pit.

Tressa reached out in a futile attempt to grasp the old woman's hand. The beast smiled, spittle dripping from its black lips, and bent down. It plucked the woman out of the flames, her body burning, and popped her into its mouth.

Tressa turned away, but that didn't silence the crunching of the woman's bones between the teeth of the beast. She trudged out of the small opening and into the main cavern, her heart as heavy as her feet.

Tressa climbed wearily, thinking of her friends, still fighting, wondering who was alive and who was dead. Each step took her farther from the beast. It bellowed below, warning Tressa that the war had just begun.

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